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# Developing a supportive learning environment in a newly formed organisation

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The aim of this study was to examine the factors that employees perceived were important in creating a supportive learning environment in a recently merged organisation. The study provides rich qualitative data from the employees' perspective.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This case study used a qualitative phenomenological constructivist approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed with the aid of NVivo. The study was conducted in a large government-owned organisation in Australia and the sample consisted of 24 recent graduates of leadership development programs.

**Findings** – The results suggested that together with the organisation's leadership, there are several distinguishing characteristics of a learning environment. These include learning with colleagues, openness to new ideas and change, building relationships, open communication, sharing the learning, coaching and reflection. Providing support for managers to gain confidence and self-awareness was important to their ability to apply their learning. The results also suggest that learning with colleagues from different regional and functional areas helps to reform subcultures and contributes to an overarching learning culture and hence to creating a supportive learning environment. Some hindrances were also discovered.

**Originality/value** – This study gives voice to employee perceptions of the important factors required to create a supportive learning environment. The authors used a qualitative methodology in a field dominated by quantitative studies to provide rich data that extends the extant literature.

**Keywords** Australia, Leadership development, Subculture, Merger, Learning environment, Learning culture

**Paper type** Case study

## Introduction

To maintain competitive success in the increasingly turbulent global economy organisations must develop capabilities for continuous learning and improve their business core processes (Hung *et al.*, 2010). Organisations that develop their learning capability reportedly benefit from increased job performance, employee self-efficacy, customer satisfaction, profitability (Aguinis and Kraiger, 2009), employee job satisfaction, organisational effectiveness (Aguinis and Kraiger, 2009; Goh *et al.*, 2012), innovation capacity and competitiveness (Goh *et al.*, 2012).

The past four decades have seen considerable interest in understanding how to build learning organisations in the belief that they lead to improved performance and effectiveness (Goh *et al.*, 2012). A learning organisation is defined as "[...] one that facilitates the learning of all of its members and continuously transforms itself in order to meet its strategic goals" (Pedlar *et al.*, 1991). Senge (1990) stimulated interest in the



relevance of learning organisations underpinned by the notions of systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, team learning and shared vision, which were heralded as the panacea to problems for organisations facing increased competition and environmental change. Nonaka (1991) characterised knowledge-creating companies as places where “everyone is a knowledge worker” and espoused that companies use metaphors and organisational redundancy to make tacit, instinctively understood ideas explicit.

Some researchers contend that the learning organisation is an ideal, with implementation remaining elusive (Garavan, 1997; Garvin, 1993). Criticising the earlier recommendations of Nonaka (1991) and Senge (1990) as too abstract, Garvin *et al.* (2008) developed a three-staged process for building a learning organisation which included building a supportive learning environment, concrete learning processes and leadership that reinforces learning. The focus of this study is how to create a supportive learning environment and the distinguishing characteristics proposed by Garvin *et al.* (2008) for the first stage of their model provide a tangible starting point for the study. These are psychological safety, appreciation of differences, openness to new ideas and time for reflection.

The learning environment potentially includes the entire range of components and activities within which learning occurs, such as structures, social support, technology, rewards and policies. Clarke (2005) used the terms learning environment and learning climate interchangeably and restricted his definition to learning that occurs solely in the workplace. Billett's (2001) definition of a learning environment, “[...] one that affords opportunities for individuals to engage in and be supported in learning at work”, likewise confines learning to the workplace. The definition used by Ellstrom *et al.* (2008), “[...] the conditions and practices in an organization that are likely to facilitate or hinder learning in and through work at a particular workplace”, is broader and more consistent with the aims of this study other than also limiting learning to the workplace. For the purposes of this study, the definition of the learning environment is: “The organisational conditions and practices that are likely to facilitate or hinder learning.”

The importance of organisational culture to learning environments is acknowledged in the literature (Lucas and Kline, 2008; Schein, 2010) and defined as:

[...] the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organisation, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic taken-for-granted fashion an organisation's view of itself and its environment (Schein, 1985).

This definition has a clear overlap with Bates and Kasawaneh's (2005) definition of a learning culture, which [...] “embodies a shared pattern of values and beliefs about the importance of learning, its dissemination and application”. These definitions highlight the importance of organisational values and beliefs in defining what is core to an organisation.

The purpose of this study is to better understand how organisations create supportive learning environments. We explore the relevance of Garvin *et al.*'s (2008) distinguishing characteristics, as well as the influence of culture and leadership. Our aim is to seek insight into any additional factors found to assist or hinder the creation of a supportive learning environment.

To learn, employees must feel safe to ask naive questions, express ideas and doubts, admit to mistakes and disagree with others' ideas without fear of ridicule or censure (Garvin *et al.*, 2008). Mistakes perform a role in the evolution of learning. Small failures provide motivation to learn by encouraging individuals to pay greater attention to the process without the defensiveness associated with major failures (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000).

When people are pressured by deadlines, their ability to think analytically, diagnose problems and be creative is compromised. Supportive learning environments allow time for pause and thoughtful review of the organisations processes (Garvin *et al.*, 2008). Encouraging reflection assists the likelihood that managers will transfer their learning and helps to demonstrate that their contributions are valuable (Clarke, 2005).

Learning occurs with exposure to others' ideas and alternate points of view (Garvin *et al.*, 2008). For example, lateral cross-functional transfers force employees to learn, develop new skills and share existing skills and perspectives with new colleagues (Slater and Narver, 1995). New ideas are essential for learning to take place. This requires questioning the status quo and current practices. Regardless of whether ideas originate through insight or creativity, collaboration with or exposure to internal or external sources, they generate organisational improvement (Garvin, 1993).

Leaders have a powerful impact on organisational culture and what leaders pay attention to is a persuasive means of communicating what they care about (Schein, 2010). When an organisation's leaders promote learning they signal that learning is an important value for the organisation. With the rapid pace of environmental change and complexity, leaders are becoming increasingly dependent on others to generate solutions. These new ideas are, however, more likely to be adopted if the organisation's members are involved in the learning process (Schein, 2010). The learning organisation literature emphasises the role of organisational culture and indicates consensus amongst organisation members about the value and use of learning in the pursuit of organisational goals and objectives (Bates and Khasawneh, 2005).

To determine an organisation's culture, sufficient stability and common history must exist for a culture to form. Some organisations have no overarching culture because of the lack of a common history and others have strong cultures due to a lengthy shared history or shared important experiences (Schein, 2010). Organisations may also have localised subcultures as a consequence of association in various groups or functions specific to and unique from the larger organisation. The influence of subcultures can affect employee perceptions of what is valued and prioritised, as well as the motivations for actions related to learning and development (Egan, 2008). The majority of studies that examine learning organisations, learning environments or learning culture assume a mono-culture (Egan, 2008) and do not consider the implications for merged or newly created organisations that are less likely to have an overarching culture. Only one of the studies reviewed linked subcultures with learning. Egan (2008) found a relationship between subcultures and motivation to transfer learning. We use a case study with a phenomenological constructivist approach to interview recent graduates of leadership development programs and explore their perceptions of the factors required to create a supportive learning environment. Whilst the literature indicates that Garvin *et al.*'s

(2008) distinguishing characteristics may be present in participants' responses, as may cultural influences, the interview process used a semi-structured approach with open questions to encourage respondents to answer in their own words, provide a variety of responses and thereby avoid any bias inadvertently created by the interviewer (Reja *et al.*, 2003). The following overarching research question was posited to achieve this objective:

*RQ1.* What factors do employees identify as important in creating a supportive learning environment?

### Context for the study

This study was conducted in an Australian government-owned utility organisation that operates over a large regional area and employs approximately 5,000 employees. The organisation was created through the merger of one city-based and six regional organisations as a result of industry deregulation. The regional entities shared a common purpose and performed the same functions, but with distinct geographical locations, structures and work practices formed over several decades. The city-based organisation had a much shorter history and different business objectives.

The organisation realised that it needed to become more customer responsive and innovative to succeed in the new environment. To achieve this aim, a suite of four leadership development programs was designed and implemented for employees with managerial responsibilities. Focus groups and subject matter experts assisted in determining the capabilities required for each level of management to meet current deficiencies and future requirements.

The resulting programs were hierarchical, with the entry-level program providing managerial and introductory leadership skills to work group leaders and new supervisors. The second program targeted experienced supervisors and new managers, delivering intermediate-level leadership skills such as managing performance and change, conflict, team dynamics and emotional intelligence skills. The third program was designed to develop strategic leadership capability in senior managers. The organisation wanted them to see themselves as organisational leaders; to understand and take accountability for their decisions and actions. The fourth program was a follow-up to the third program, designed to hone their capabilities in strategic thinking, relationship management, stakeholder influencing and innovation.

### Study design and methodology

A qualitative phenomenological constructivist approach within a case study was considered appropriate to achieve the purpose of this study, which was to explore the factors that participants perceived important in creating a supportive learning environment. Phenomenological constructivist approaches are consistent with social research methods. Utilising a descriptive phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to explore the experiences of participants through the descriptions that they provided (Englander, 2012). Similarly, a constructivist approach requires the researcher to participate in the research process with the subjects to ensure the information produced is reflective of their reality (Lincoln *et al.*, 2013).

The generic inductive qualitative model used in this study shares many characteristics with grounded theory. The essential differences between the models are that grounded theory studies use theoretic sampling, constant comparison of data to theoretical categories and focus on theory development via theoretical saturation of categories (Birks and Mills, 2011). The following methods of sampling and analysis were selected for this study.

### *Sample*

Purposeful sampling was used to ensure representation from each course and gender. A key issue in purposeful sampling is identifying people who can best help in understanding the phenomena of interest (Creswell, 2014). Due to a disproportionately high number of males in senior management (over 90 per cent) the host organisation ensured that some females were included in each program, thus the researcher considered it appropriate that females were included in the sample. The sample comprised six graduates from each program and included 15 males and 9 females. They had all completed the program between 3 and 12 months previously, allowing sufficient time to experience any support provided. All participants were selected prior to commencing the data collection and analysis.

### *Procedure*

Following clearance to conduct the study from the University Human Research Ethics Committee, invitations were emailed to selected participants and a subsequent telephone call confirmed participation and interview arrangements. Twenty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face, two by telephone with remotely located participants and one via email at the participant's request. The questions were forwarded in advance to those participating via telephone or email and their responses were consistent with other participants.

The interview guide consisted of 13 open-ended questions. All respondents were asked identical questions in the same sequence, with further probing questions only asked if necessary to gather more details or for clarification. The interview questions covered the following domains of inquiry:

- new skills learnt to increase effectiveness, including application, changes to their management style and interactions with others;
- how the organisation demonstrates interest in developing leaders;
- the nature of discussions with supervisors, including any encouragement to participate, use new skills, develop new ideas and initiate changes to practices and processes;
- perceptions of supervisor understanding of concepts learnt in the development programs; and
- anything that may hinder application of new learning.

To establish the trustworthiness of the data and the subsequent interpretation, a range of sources was used, including the participants, senior managers and company documents, although interviews were the primary source. The interviews were recorded verbatim, followed by member checking where participants reviewed their interview transcript for accuracy (Lincoln *et al.*, 2013).

### *Data analysis*

The interviews were transcribed and uploaded into NVivo prior to the commencement of any coding or analysis. The unit of analysis in this study was the same as the case; the group of purposefully selected participants who possessed knowledge to shed light on the phenomenon of interest (Grunbaum, 2007).

To commence the coding process, each interview transcript was reviewed sequentially, and as a meaningful segment of text suggested a category, a descriptive label was created by the researcher. Additional segments of text were added to the category where relevant and new labels created when a different category emerged from the data. The labels were data-driven rather than concept-driven as the researcher wanted to keep an open mind and not use a preconceived analytic framework (Gibbs, 2002). Some phrases or segments of text were coded into more than one category as is common practice with qualitative coding (Thomas, 2006). For example, the following segment of text was coded at both “confidence” and “practice opportunities”:

I Think i've been given the opportunity to grow by being given this project role so it recognises my capabilities and I have had some feedback from my manager that he has noticed a change in how I deal with some issues. I am a little stronger and more driving [manager #03].

Demographic data was linked to each participant, as were memos containing thoughts about participants, the interviews or emerging categories and themes. A journal was maintained to record the processes followed during the study and the reasons for any changes made.

Following the initial stage of coding, the interview transcripts were re-examined “horizontally” by question and the initial labels reviewed. Closely related concepts were merged and others divided into subcategories where the supporting data was divergent. During this stage of analysis, it became apparent that the participants’ reality included both positive and negative descriptions of the same phenomena. For example, the initial label of “follow-up discussion” was divided into “follow-up discussion” and “no follow-up discussion”. To provide clarity, the category of “hindrances” was created with negative examples from all categories recoded. Any coding discrepancies were revised and recoded where necessary to ensure consistent application of codes. Table I provides a summary of the revised learning environment codes and subcodes.

Coding the data provided a rich amount of information. The number of individuals independently expressing the same idea is considered more important than the absolute number of times a theme is expressed or coded. Talkative individuals could express the same idea in several responses, thereby increasing the frequency of a code application (Guest *et al.*, 2006). Whilst in this study, the category of supervisor support was deemed significant, it is also important to note that as several of the interview questions specifically related to interactions with and perceptions of the participants’ supervisor, it was likely that all participants would mention something related to supervisor support. The researcher must therefore determine the key themes, rather than relying on counts created by software programs.

**Table I.**  
Summary of learning  
environment codes  
and subcodes

First-tier code	Second tier	No. of sources	No. of references
Learning environment		Nil	Nil
	Supervisor support	24	73
	Build relationships	22	58
	Sharing the learning	21	31
	Provide training	21	31
	Open communications	21	52
	Self-awareness	19	48
	Hindrances	18	50
	Confidence	17	41
	Coaching	13	24
	Reflection	12	37
	Reinforcement for learning	11	19
	Practice opportunities	11	22
	Trust	11	15
	Senior management sponsorship	10	11
	Involvement	10	17
Learning with colleagues	8	13	
Learn from mistakes	5	5	

Based on the analysis of the case, four key themes were derived from the codes or labels assigned to the data shown in Table I. The results report on the main themes together with the relevant categories, or subcodes that support them. The main themes include the required leadership, environmental and personal characteristics, as well as the hindrances that participants perceived important in the creation of a supportive learning environment.

NVivo facilitates comparing and contrasting responses based on the demographic attributes assigned to each participant. Groups were created based on gender, organisational level, program attended and geographic location. In the final stage of analysis, these groups were interrogated to determine if the experiences reported by the participants were different for any particular group to those of the other participants. Any additional notable findings are also reported.

## Results

### *Leadership*

Executive-level sponsorship was considered critical. Providing development programs was judged a key support factor, as was the significant financial investment. Senior leaders' presence to open the programs, as guest speakers, or to attend as participants was a tangible symbol of commitment. As expressed by one manager:

Having an executive management team member attend showed that they also are expected to be across aspects and that it's important enough to be there [manager #16].

Reinforcement for learning was provided through follow-up initiatives, such as leadership forums where program graduates presented their new initiatives and business issues were openly discussed with participants working together to develop solutions.



Supervisor support was also regarded as vital and demonstrated by encouraging employees to use their new skills and providing feedback on their efforts. Practice opportunities such as short-term changes to roles, acting in their supervisor's position or working on projects were reported as supporting their learning. Supervisors were expected to role model the desired skills and leadership behaviours and discuss the concepts with them. Access to business information and involvement in discussions and planning processes were considered important for learning. Participants identified themselves as part of the decision-making process, regarding their involvement as recognition that their learning and contribution were valued. They also reported that they now involved their own employees in decisions that affected them and their workgroup.

The results derived for the key theme of leadership were consistent across the demographic groups with the exception of the nature of support preferred. Participants who undertook the introductory leadership program valued hands-on assistance with assignments and with relating new concepts to their work. Those who completed the three higher-level programs appreciated autonomy to develop and implement their new initiatives.

#### *Environmental characteristics*

Learning with colleagues was considered particularly beneficial and participants described the value of learning about other parts of the business from people they did not normally work with. This included listening to others' views and exploring concepts from a wider organisational perspective rather than solely from their own experience. As one team leader expressed:

[...] having input from people from different business units; their needs were different to mine [...] they may have been doing what I do, but doing it in a different way [...] how they handled difficult employees, then we discussed it with the group. It let me think outside of the box to look at other angles to a problem [team leader #18].

Relationships developed during the programs continued afterwards with participants working on projects with cohort members from other regional areas or workgroups. Participants also believed their efforts to build relationships with their peers and employees following the program contributed to the learning environment.

Newly trained managers related sharing their learning from the programs with their employees. They described using specific tools or models such as conflict management and team building to work through team and business issues. For example:

I have shared the team building concepts with some of my team leaders and senior trainers. I have taught them how to better communicate with their teams and build rapport. It has made them take ownership of their leadership role [Team leader #18].

Some participants described sharing their learning from the psychological assessment instruments with their teams to understand their preferences for learning and working styles.

Coaching was considered beneficial to extend and embed the learning. Participant accounts of coaching included coaching skills training as well as external coaching provided to them during the programs and ongoing coaching by

their supervisors. They also reported that they were now coaching their own employees.

Participants described changes to their communication style as more open with their employees in regard to what was happening in the business, such as informing them of impending changes and issues. Communicating their expectations about desired outcomes and making themselves available to talk through any issues were believed to enhance the learning environment for their employees.

Reflection was regarded as helpful for learning and participants reported that taking the time to reflect allowed them to stop and think about the issues and to plan and prioritise how they would resolve them. One manager said:

I tend to get in, do something and move on. I find taking time to reflect has had a big impact on me [...]. I've changed the way I operate since the program [manager #11].

The concept of learning from mistakes was insignificant in terms of the number of participants identifying it as a support factor. What was interesting is that during the analysis by demographic grouping a comparatively large percentage of engineers reported it as helpful for learning.

#### *Personal characteristics*

The most valuable benefits from attending the development programs were reported as gaining confidence (17 of the 24 participants) and self-awareness (19 of the 24). Gaining confidence was credited with enabling participants to speak up at meetings, offer their opinions and ideas, get involved and try new things, access and use company information and to better manage their employees. Their newfound confidence was reportedly acquired through coaching, taking part in guided group discussions and practice opportunities. One participant said:

[...] [...] the program gave me additional insight and exposure to senior leaders and their strengths and weaknesses. It helped me to realise that they aren't perfect and I don't need to be perfect either and that's an ok place to be [manager #14].

Participants described gaining self-awareness through feedback and the psychological testing instruments used during the programs. They related how gaining insight into how others perceived them allowed them to change their behaviour if they wanted to have a different impact.

Interrogating the categories for personal characteristics by demographic group found a significant difference in relation to gaining confidence by gender. The 17 participants who mentioned increased confidence included 8 of the 9 females in the study (89 per cent) and 9 of the 15 males (60 per cent).

#### *Hindrances*

Participants reporting hindrances to their learning mainly described the lack of supervisor support, interest and encouragement to use new skills following their participation in the development programs. They were cynical about supervisors who did not role model the behaviours and concepts taught in the programs and believed that made them unable or unwilling to support their learning.

Cultural differences between the predecessor organisations were said to block efforts to learn and achieve workplace change. Participants referred to "the not invented here syndrome", indicating that people were unwilling to adopt practices

and ideas proposed by others from different predecessor organisations. Other reported hindrances included being too busy back at work to practice new skills or reflection and the remoteness of their locations made it difficult to collaborate with cohort members. The results derived for the key theme of hindrances were consistent across the demographic groups.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand how organisations create supportive learning environments. We explored the leadership, characteristics and cultural factors that impacted on the creation of a supportive learning environment. During the study, it became apparent that there are also negative aspects that may impede the development of such an environment.

Participants believed access to high-quality development programs was essential and described the financial commitment and dedicated resources as tangible evidence that the organisations' leaders were committed to supporting their learning. The leaders' symbolic support through participation in the programs and the ensuing reinforcement provided were also recognised. This finding is consistent with Schein (2010) regarding the significance of leaders paying attention to what they believe in or care about. Our results suggest that sponsorship by the organisation's leaders is essential to creating a supportive learning environment.

Supervisors have a significant influence on the learning environment. They demonstrated their openness to new ideas when they provided encouragement to participants to develop and implement new initiatives. Such encouragement is essential to enable employees to use their new learning at work. Being open to new ideas was one of Garvin *et al.*'s (2008) supportive learning environment characteristics and our results support this concept. Participants also believed that open communication, access to company information and being involved in making decisions that affected them were important for learning. They regarded it as essential that employees were kept informed about the organisation's plans so that they all understood their part in the bigger picture.

When participants were asked what new skills they had been able to apply in the workplace, most replied that they were now coaching their own employees and sharing their learning from the development programs with them. By using the skills and concepts in team meetings and coaching their employees, newly trained managers were furthering the organisation's learning culture and enhancing the learning environment in the workplace. This is somewhat consistent with Goldman *et al.* (2014) who reported on "second-hand" learning where graduates of leadership programs passed on their learning to peers and supervisors in an academic hospital setting. Learning from mistakes was a key factor in the Garvin *et al.* (2008) concept of psychological safety. This was not a significant finding in our study and is only noteworthy because it was comparatively more significant to the professional engineers in the study when their responses were compared to other groups. The engineers reported that they had previously been taught only to look for faults and to expect a perfect job every time. They reported that they now used mistakes as a learning opportunity with their employees. Gaining confidence was identified as one of the most valuable outcomes from the development programs. It was this newfound confidence that enabled participants to apply their new skills at work and, therefore, presumably, to transfer

their learning. A significant finding from this study is that gaining confidence in a supportive learning environment prior to returning to the workplace appears to be of particular importance to women. Eighty-nine per cent of the female participants as compared to 60 per cent of the males independently reported gaining confidence through the development program.

Acquiring self-awareness was also deemed important to support learning. The insights gained from psychological profile testing, together with individual feedback and group discussions were considered beneficial. All participants who described this process reported being surprised by their feedback; some pleased and some shocked. They all reported taking action to build on the positive aspects, or where they felt they needed to change their behaviour to create a different impression, such as becoming a better listener or being more responsive to the needs and feelings of their employees or peers.

Reflection was a characteristic of a supportive learning environment reported by [Garvin \*et al.\* \(2008\)](#), for which our results provide support. Participants reported the benefits of taking the time to stop and think during the program. However, most found it difficult to make time for reflection back at work due to the pressure and workload inherent in the workplace. Learning with colleagues from different regional areas and business units was considered particularly beneficial, for example, hearing alternative viewpoints about work issues and functional perspectives. Whilst the label that emerged during the coding for this aspect was “learning with colleagues”, the meaning of the category is the same as and, hence, supports the concept that [Garvin \*et al.\* \(2008\)](#) termed “appreciation of differences”. Participants benefitted through the learning cohorts being selected from people with similar levels of responsibility, but from different regional and functional areas. This provided greater diversity and a broader perspective to the learning environment.

The results of this study also identified some hindrances to creating a supportive learning environment. The main hindrances were lack of supervisor support and encouragement. Supervisors were perceived as unsupportive if they did not initiate follow-up discussions about participants’ experience of their learning and how they could apply it at work. Supervisors not role modelling the concepts and behaviours that the organisation sought to promote were also perceived as detrimental to the learning environment.

Remoteness due to the organisation’s large geographical spread made collaboration more difficult and this was not assisted by the lack of learning collaboration mechanisms and technology. Participants also reported being too busy back at work as a hindrance. The learning environment may have benefitted further if senior leaders and supervisors had provided more encouragement and opportunity for pause and review in the workplace. Whilst participants perceived that cultural differences between the predecessor organisations inhibited learning, in reality their comments related to experiences and perceptions from before they jointly participated in the development programs and experienced the benefits of learning together and building relationships. One indication of improvement is their reports of collaborating on projects and initiatives with those from other regions and workgroups following the programs.

The results of this study build on the findings of [Egan \(2008\)](#) and [Riad \(2007\)](#) and add to the body of knowledge about the impact of organisational subcultures on the

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learning environment. Our results suggest that learning with people from different subcultural groups positively influences the creation of a supportive learning environment.

### *Strengths and limitations*

The results of this study should be considered in terms of its strengths and limitations. An important strength is that we used a phenomenological constructivist approach to better understand what participants considered important in creating a supportive learning environment. This methodology allowed detailed examination of the relevant factors which resulted in new insights that may assist organisations and practitioners in their endeavours to develop such environments. A second strength is that we interviewed participants from different levels of the organisation and found general agreement on perceptions of what was important in creating a supportive learning environment.

A potential limitation is the use of a single case study. Whilst single case studies are not as strong a base for generalising to a population of cases as other research designs (Yin, 2009), people can learn much that is general from a single case (Stake, 1995). A second limitation is that because we used a purposefully selected sample it may not be representative of all course graduates. A third limitation is that the interview questions posed may have obliged the participants to focus on the social issues impacting their learning rather than technical or physical factors.

### *Research implications*

This study has raised some questions about gaining a deeper understanding of potential gender differences in acquiring the confidence to undertake a leadership role. We found a significantly larger percentage of female participants who reported that the development program enhanced their confidence to use new skills in the work place. As gender differences were not a specific focus of this study, further research is warranted to understand what makes a difference and if this is an isolated or more general finding.

The cross-sectional design of the present study prohibits suggestions of causal relationships, therefore, we cannot generalise the results to other organisations and populations. Conducting a longitudinal study in a different organisation with a similar context would be beneficial to test our results.

### *Practical implications*

The findings of this study have practical implications for creating supportive learning environments. Our results suggest that to create such an environment, it is essential that senior leadership assumes sponsorship of the organisation's learning agenda. With the potential for subcultural groups to undermine learning efforts, it is important to create new shared experiences to form the foundation on which to establish an overarching culture of learning. Our results suggest beneficial outcomes from selecting cohorts for development programs and projects from different subcultural groups. We also propose that leadership development programs would benefit from including coaching skills as a learning outcome. Newly trained leaders who coach their employees share their learning, thus furthering the workplace learning environment.

## Conclusion

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to test the influence of subcultures on the creation of a learning environment. Subcultural influences in merged organisations are generally considered problematic (Schein, 2010). Our results, however, suggest that selecting cohorts for development programs from across subcultural groups actually has a positive influence on the learning environment.

This study investigated the four distinguishing characteristics of supportive learning environments espoused by Garvin *et al.* (2008). Our results provide support for three of these:

- (1) appreciation of differences;
- (2) openness to new ideas; and
- (3) time for reflection.

We found only partial support for psychological safety. Additionally, building relationships, open communications, sharing the learning, coaching, confidence and self-awareness were found to be at least equally important as the characteristics proposed by Garvin *et al.* (2008).

Whilst the presence of learning environment characteristics is important, they are insufficient by themselves to create a supportive learning environment. The most influential factor in creating such an environment is the organisation's leadership. Senior leader sponsorship of the organisations learning agenda, together with the support provided by supervisors is indispensable to creating a supportive learning environment. The organisations leaders are also best-placed to eradicate any identified hindrances to the creation of such an environment.

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