

Leadership for Quality in Cambodian Higher Education
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Introduction

There can be no doubt that the leadership requirements of today's emerging organisations are the subject of considerable change. Nicholson and Nairn (2006:6) have suggested that the years leading up to 2020 will see:

a substantial new agenda unfold for managers and executives. They will need to respond to major changes in their external environment globally and domestically, as well as changes in the workplace, changing expectations of their role and the way their performance is assessed.

This emerging organisational environment poses considerable challenges for the process of executive development, where alternative conceptual frameworks and practical solutions are required to support executive and organisational learning. Over the last decade technological advances, mergers, acquisitions, downsizing and changing environments have transformed the nature of organisations. As a consequence, executive development has had to become more responsive to this emerging environment. Complex organisations have grown increasingly aware that, to be successful, they must adopt a broader outlook, become more open to external opportunities, and maintain a culture of constant learning. In relation to leadership development in higher education, Scott, Coates and Anderson (2008:xvii) suggest that "current approaches to leadership development in higher education need to be radically conceptualised" and that leaders in such organisations prefer "role specific, practice-based, peer-supported and self-managed learning rather than the more usual one-off, formal and generic workshop-based types of professional learning". Raelin (2006:165) sums up the changing paradigm of executive education by observing that:

Formal management education programs in academia and corporate development initiatives are already transitioning to educational approaches that make use of actual business problems. Since organizational members are increasingly being encouraged to co-construct their own practice environments, it is reasonable that they be expected to co-construct their learning environments from the requirements of their local situation and not only from the mind-set of external authorities or academic experts.

Higher education is facing unprecedented challenges at the start of the 21st century, under the impact of globalization, knowledge-based economic growth, as well as the information and communication revolution. These momentous changes in the environment are stretching the traditional boundaries of higher education. The time dimension is altered by the requirement for lifelong learning while new technologies are doing away with space barriers altogether.

Approaches to executive development

There are a number of approaches, informed by research, that constitute the theoretical basis for executive development.

Management Development (MD) studies

Management development includes approaches such as leadership development, management education and management training. Management development can be broadly defined as the strategic utilisation of a range of internal and external processes that seek to enhance management systems through the achievement of personal competencies, the facilitation of team learning and the improvement of organisational systems (AACSB International, 2005). Within this definition management development

may have multiple functions in order to serve individual, team and organisation learning – developing the capacity of the organisation to manage change and successfully navigate the challenges of an unpredictable future. (Buckley & Monks, 2007; Kirkbride, 2003; Mighty & Ashtom, 2002). Within this environment of change and complexity management development “must examine and solve the problem of providing effective continuing education for managers at different career and organisational levels” (Mailick, 1998:1).

Top management Team (TMT) studies

One of the most significant body of research relating to executive leadership exists through top management team (TMT) research. A top management team (TMT) provides a way to cope with the turbulence and complexities of the external environments that has complicate the task of executive leadership (Hambrook 1998; Janofski 1993; Nadler 1998). Top Management Team effectiveness (Hambrook 1987) includes:

- The degree to which a team decisions enhance organisational performance
- Member commitment to implementing the team’s decisions and willingness to work together in the future
- The extent to which the team’s operational processes meet members’ growth and satisfaction needs

Top Management Teams need to comprehend and interpret a great deal of vague, ambiguous and often conflicting information from different sources. They manage diverse external; commitments, for the Board of Directors to shareholders, analysts. Government officials and potential alliance partners. Furthermore, TMTs must decide which (of the many options) are the most critical tasks to perform and face ambiguous and ill structured problems.

Senior leadership in developing countries

Although there is limited knowledge about effective approaches to management education in less developed countries, there is an increasing understanding of the difficulties being faced by organisations in these countries in initiating and sustaining formal management education programs. For example in a research study relating to management development as capacity building in PNG (Berry, 2008) it was found that a number of organisations did not have well-established management development programs. Reasons for this included:

- the need to focus on other more pressing external issues including infrastructure development, law and order issues, political interference or lack of government support
- the difficulty in releasing managers to participate in management development given their operational responsibilities
- a shortage of, or lack of access to, funds to develop and implement such programs
- previous experience with management development programs being less than positive resulting in low confidence in the capacity of management development to deliver desired outcomes
- management development for the leadership team was only in its infancy given the very recent appointment of the organisational leader
- the organisation supported managers at a personal level through processes such as informal mentoring, coaching and experience sharing only as the need arose
- there was a lack of commitment to management development by senior administrators, unexpected changes to personnel in senior roles or lack of clarity about responsibilities for management development had prevented a program from existing.

While there are some examples of management development programs from across the public and private sectors that contribute to predominantly individual manager learning (Berry, 2008), it is less clear as to

what approaches to management development could also contribute to team learning and organisational learning. It is clear from these studies that executive development needs to:

- acknowledge the complexities of the executive role
- respect client knowledge and experience
- have an educational basis
- build relevant knowledge
- support effective organisational leadership
- be credible in process and content

Action Learning and executive development

Action learning is an approach to executive development that has become an accepted component of executive development programs. Action learning is an organisational change strategy employed to simultaneously enhance individual and organisational learning, while at the same time achieving of practical outcomes within the workplace. Revans (1982) defines action learning as a method to generate learning from human interaction occurring as learners engage together in real-time work problems. Learning arises not just from representations of conceptual material but from questioning among fellow learners as they tackle unfamiliar problems. Revans argues that learning occurs where programmed knowledge (eg traditional instruction) is questioned, reflected upon and critically analysed within and action context. Similarly, Raelin (2000:66) sees action learning as “an education strategy, used in a group setting, that seeks to generate learning from human interaction arising from engagement in the solution of real time (not simulated) work problems” and suggests, whatever the action learning model employed, it is imperative that:

- learning be acquired in the midst of action and dedicated to the task at hand.
- knowledge creation and utilization be seen as collective activities wherein learning can become everyone’s job.
- its users demonstrate a learning-to-learn aptitude which frees them to question the underlying assumptions of practice.

Zafar (2006: 7) describes action learning as “a pedagogical approach which allows people to use their jobs, the challenges identified within these jobs, and the support of their colleagues as a basis for learning”. Action Learning is the approach that links the world of learning with the world of action through a reflective process within small cooperative learning groups known as 'action learning sets' (McGill & Beaty 1995). The 'sets' meet regularly to work on individual members' real-life issues with the aim of learning with and from each other. There is evidence to suggest that action learning is an appropriate learning approach to support management development. For example Riley (2009:52) notes the increasing popularity of action learning in Australian management development programs in observing that “action learning has been identified in many Australian MBA programs and a variety of approaches with the learning of action learning has been observed with the intent of helping students better understand and apply the lessons of management”. Thorpe, Taylor & Elliot (2005:147) see management development “occurring most effectively when managers learn on the job through experience, when the evaluation of a manager’s activities lies in practical results and supplementary learning is practice-linked – in other words action learning”. Action learning focuses on existing real challenges facing an organisation as the catalyst for:

- individual learning through interaction with others in a problem solving environment
- team development through the use of action learning teams
- organisational learning through the resolution of problems and challenges and the improvement of processes.

As a management development strategy, action learning utilises cross functional or cross organisational teams, and the diversity of experience within these teams, as the basis for the learning and change process.

In order for action learning to be successful “there must be top-level support for the program as well as those participating in the action learning groups” (Marquardt,1999:216) and it “must be something participants can get their teeth into, will find a challenge, want to be able to resolve, and that is important to their organisation (Weinstein, 1999:88). Within the domain of executive development, it appears that action learning is growing in popularity and is being deployed across a wide range of business applications, such as early career programs, new manager assimilation, skill development, high-potential development, team effectiveness, continuous improvement, knowledge management, and organizational transition (Vicere, 1998; Fulmer, Gibbs, & Goldsmith, 2000; Delahoussaye, 2001; Martineau & Hannum, 2003; Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2004).

The pilot program

The purpose of the pilot program was to evaluate the degree to which an executive education program based on an action learning approach was successful in enabling participants to demonstrate enhanced leadership capacity in the areas of:

- strategic thinking and planning
- effective verbal and written communicating
- change and innovation management
- responsible action and decision making
- positive influence on others

The pilot program involved six (6) executives, with each being from one of six higher education institutions located in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. These institutions were Khemarak University, Chenla University, Western University, University of Economics and Law, Royal University of Phnom Penh and the National University of Management. The six representative universities were selected by the Director, DSR whose professional responsibilities include liaison with all Cambodian HEIs in relation to higher education qualifications and research issues. The invited HEIs were those who had demonstrated an interest in management development during a previous visit to each of them by the Director, DSR and the Program Coordinator, and were likely to be committed to the pilot program. The three components of the program are described below.

Workshops to build conceptual knowledge

A series of five (5) half-day workshops were provided by the Program Facilitator to build and extend participants’ knowledge of quality management. The workshop themes were:

- Leading and managing in the information era
- Leading strategy and planning
- Leading teams
- Leading service quality
- Leading quality systems

During these workshops participants experienced a range of presentations, discussions, role plays, scenarios and reflecting activities aimed to surface, share and extend participants knowledge of quality management in complex organisations. A further key element of each of these workshops were action learning interventions where participants worked in triads to assist one another to investigate, understand and resolve issues associated with the planning and implementation of their chosen quality management project.

Executive coaching to support project implementing

The Program Facilitator served as the executive coach for each participant. All participants were involved in four two-hour coaching sessions. During these sessions the Program Facilitator sought to link the workshop content with the participant’s project, raise further questions about the implementation process,

observe the participants in leadership capacity building activities, provide advice is required and involve encourage reflection practice.

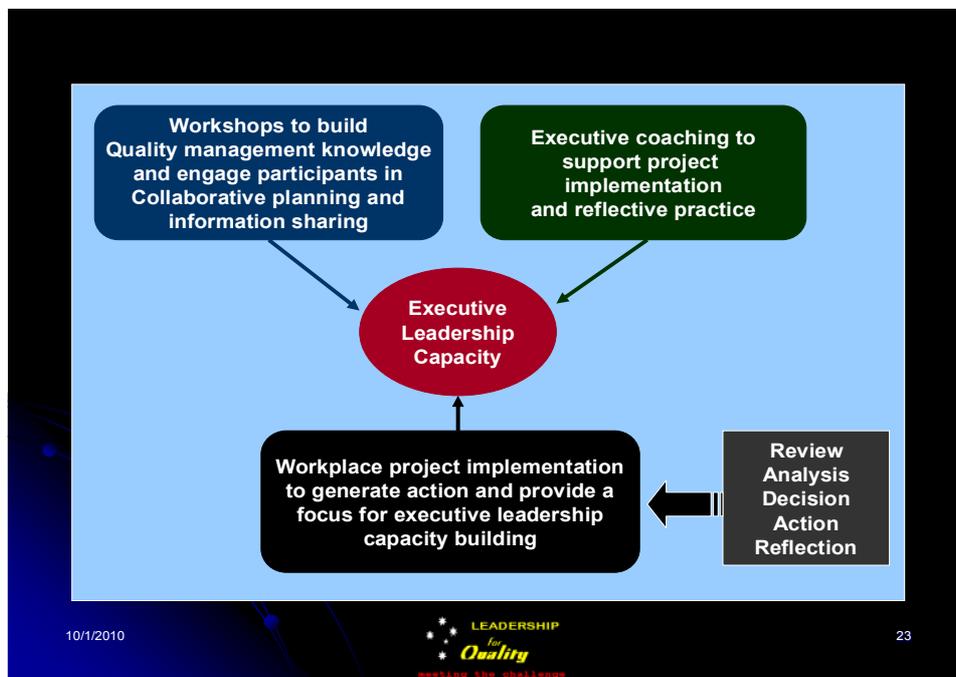
Workplace projects

The purpose of the workplace project component was to generate the action requires for leadership capacity development. The workplace project implementation component of the program was undertaken using the following five-phased process to provide a structure for capacity building:

- Review: Each participant reviewed the status of their organisation in relation to a number of attributes associated with a culture of quality to assist the participant to identify focus area for a short project
- Analysis: Each participant, in collaboration with other members of the or top management team, considered the outcomes of the review and identified option for quality management
- Decision: Each participant made a decision on the project to be undertaken and provided an overview of the intended project to the program facilitator and fellow program participants, who provided feedback and suggestions for an implementation plan.
- Action: Each participant implemented the chosen action plan, with support and advice being provided during the implementation process by fellow participants and the program facilitator. The implementation plan was amended, in some cases, during this phase as unanticipated issues arose or new options for action emerged.
- Reflection: Each participant assessed the outcomes of the project and presented this information to fellow program participants, the program facilitator and other interested parties. This included an assessment by each participant of any evidence for leadership capacity they had gained over the program period. It also included a plan for any intended further action learning.

Figure 1 below shows how the elements of the program are interconnected.

Figure 1. Components of the Executive Development program



The program evaluation process

A program evaluation was undertaken through systemic gathering of information (Owen & Rogers, 1999) about the planning, implementation and outcomes of the executive leadership development program in order to make judgements about the degree to which the program enhanced the leadership capacities of

participating executives. Inman & Vernon (1997) suggest that measures to evaluate the impact of executive learning may incorporate informal and incidental learning that occurs within the workplace itself rather than in the classroom. Although conventional survey and evaluation techniques can be employed, action learning may make use of narratives and dialogic approaches, such as scenarios and process maps, to capture the embedded learning through consensus-building processes. Specifically, the research was “utilization-focused” evaluation (Patton, 1997) undertaken as a collaborative partnership with participating executives, their sponsors and the program facilitator in order to facilitate ownership, commitment to management education and self-directed organisational change. This evaluative approach was appropriate to the developmental needs of participants where capacity-building is a fundamental requirement for ownership and sustainability (Bost, 2006; Aguilar, 2007). The knowledge generated was intended to enhance leadership capacity. The evaluation process included the following components.

Component 1 - Workshop evaluations: Written evaluation questionnaire at the conclusion of each workshop to evaluate of the degree to which workshop extended participants’ knowledge of quality management to support project implementation

Component 2 - Purposeful dialogue evaluation: Program facilitator observation, and participant’s feedback, of action learning discussions undertaken by participant triads in order to assess the degree to which discussion involvement enhanced communication skills

Component 3 - Coaching session evaluation: Semi-structured interview with each participant on the value of the executive coaching sessions to assess the degree to which these sessions supported leadership capacity building and project implementation

Component 4 - Project evaluation: Observation of each participant’s project presentation and an interview with each sponsor to assess the degree to which the project served as a catalyst for leadership capacity building and as a development activity for the organisation

Component 5 - Process evaluations: A written questionnaire completed by each participant to assess the degree to which the RADAR process provided a viable structure for executive action learning

The Action Learning Model

Action learning was utilised as a management development process for the Senior Executive Development Program because there was:

- an expressed interest by each organisation to learn about relevant approaches to executive development
- an interest in working on a quality management issue of importance to the organisation
- a small number of participants enabling the action learning process to be effectively managed and trialed
- a belief that those participating in the action learning process would be able to implement change in the workplace
- enough diversity among the participant group to enable a range of experience, interests and knowledge
- a willingness by participants themselves to participate in action learning and to take responsible for fulfilling expectations.

It was also established from the outset that participating executives had:

- a willingness to interact with others who may have differing view and experiences to themselves
- the authority to act on the outcomes of the action learning process
- the time and other resources to undertake the action learning process.

Marquardt (2004) has identified six action learning elements that serve as a viable model for management development and provide a philosophical basis for the approach adopted within this program.

Element of the action learning model	Program Element
<p><u>An important urgent problem:</u> Ideal projects are focused on the challenges of complex issues for which there are no known solutions and that requires creativity and innovation to solve. Managers or executive who serve as sponsors share their problem and vision on an organisational issue critical to the success of the agency and engage the team, provide resources and expect results.</p>	<p>In collaboration with their sponsor and executive teams, participants selected a current quality management challenge as a focus for actions learning</p>
<p><u>A diverse group of four to eight people:</u> Teams ideally comprise a group of interdisciplinary of inter-agency or intra-agency members with a diversity of skills and perspectives, and a commitment to meet together and take action until the work is completed. Teams are led by members who experiment with, and rotate into, differing roles in the team. Every member is asked to make team meetings a top priority.</p>	<p>A group of six executives, each from a different HEI agreed to participant in then program. Each group member brought individual experiences and knowledge to the group dynamics.</p>
<p><u>Insightful questioning and reflective listening:</u> The process requires that all statements in the groups be made only in response to questions. The action learning model helps to re-frame problems, challenging assumptions and share insights to promote a more introspective, self-aware and innovative learning environment.</p>	<p>Five group sessions took place with participants working in triads of various formations using a range of suggested question for facilitate lateral thinking.</p>
<p><u>Implement action on a problem:</u> Some action on the project must be taken for real energy, innovation and learning to take place. Challenging real workplace issues that require the skills, knowledge and abilities of the team members can provide an opportunity to demonstrate accomplishments and promote practical learning on specific leadership competencies.</p>	<p>Each team member commenced the workplace project planning and implementation process with a focus on a quality management challenge, with the requirement that the outcomes to date would be presented at the conclusion of the program period.</p>
<p><u>Commitment to learn.</u> Everyone on the team agrees to be a learner in order to promote equality, vulnerability and a willingness to develop as individuals and as a group. This commitment to learning supports individual and agency development of leadership competencies through the action learning process.</p>	<p>Participants required the support of their sponsor in order to participate, which carries with it a commitment to both contribute to, and learn from, all program activities</p>
<p><u>Presence of an action learning coach:</u> A coach is assigned to every meeting, usually a member of the team but alternatively and external expert to the group. Coaches also have the power to ask key questions of the team at any point whenever they see an opportunity to learn or clarify the problem or goal, and the team must attempt to answer that question before moving foreword. The coach plays a critical role on the team to promote reflection and inquiry.</p>	<p>The Program Coordinator served as action learning coach, action learning group adviser and workshop facilitator.</p>

Role for the Program Coordinator

The Program Coordinator served a number of roles within the project incusing workshop facilitator, action learning advisor, executive coach and program evaluator. The Program Coordinator however, was able to take an objective stance to the program having no affiliated with any participating HEI or the Higher education system generally. Raelin (2006:159) however maintains that the facilitator does not act alone in suggesting that “the facilitator, though an important agent in action learning, is not responsible for all the learning in the team. Although a facilitator may be a coach to team members, he or she would not be the only coach. Each member of the team has a personal responsibility to develop him or herself with the help of other team and organizational members as well as the facilitator”. Within the Executive Development Program participants were able to seek support from their institutional sponsor, fellow members of their executive team and from the Director, DSR as appropriate.

Reasons for wishing to participate in the program

The Senior Executive, in most cases the Rector, of each participating HEI was invited to complete an expression of interest, state the reasons for wishing to involve their executive member in the program and agree to serve as sponsor for their participant. Reasons for participation included:

- the need to build the leadership capacity of the executive nominated
- to learn more about approaches to quality management
- to enhance the HEI's management systems.

Steps in the executive development intervention

The pilot program was run over a four (4) weeks, although a series of preparatory steps were ten in the week leading up to the program implementation, as well as post program activities. In order to facilitate the program a number of steps were undertaken

Program step	Responsibility	Anticipated outcome
Pre-program steps		
Liaison with DSR	Program Coordinator	Agreement on the need for, and nature of, the program as an outcome of a previous assignment undertaken as a collaborative effort between the Department of Scientific Research and the Australian Business Volunteers.
Assignment application development	Director DSR	Support from ABV to facilitate the program through an Assignment application submitted through the ABV Country Manager and then the ABV in Australia.
Submission of Secretary of State	Director DSR	Support from Secretary of State on the importance of the program
Liaison with ABV	Program Coordinator	Finalisation of details of the program delivery
Liaison with each HEI / participant	Director DSR	HEI commitment to sponsor one executive to participant in the program
Program content preparation	Program Coordinator	Materials and processes to enable the program to take place
Expression of Interest for each HEI	HEI sponsor	Written expression of interest using a standard template to verify commitment by each sponsor to support their participants and an understanding of each participant's organisation and participants
Program implementation steps		
Initial workshop	Program Coordinator	Participant understanding of the purpose and content of the program as well as participant expectations and introductions. Sessions on the notion of organisational change and organisational learning. First action learning discussion on intended project.
Coaching session 1	Program Coordinator	Learning organisational review to identify broad area for project work. Follow up on Workshop One theme and its implications for the project and leadership capacity building
Workshop 2	Program Coordinator	Sessions on strategic thinking and planning. Second action learning discussion on initial stage of project implementation and anticipated project challenges / issues.
Coaching session 2	Program Coordinator	Follow up on Workshop Two theme and its implications for the project and leadership capacity building
Workshop 3	Program Coordinator	Sessions on Team Leadership and individual leadership styles. Third action learning session on project implementation and leadership learning that has been taking place.
Coaching session 3	Program Coordinator	Follow up on Workshop Three theme and its implications for the project and leadership capacity building.

Workshop 4	Program Coordinator	Sessions on Service Quality. Fourth action learning session on project implementation and leadership learning that has been taking place.
Coaching session 4	Program Coordinator	Follow up on Workshop Four theme and its implications for the project and leadership capacity building. Review of the outcomes of the coaching sessions through a semi-structured interview with each participant/.
Workshop 5	Program Coordinator	Sessions on Quality Systems and evaluation of the workshop program. Fifth action learning session on project implementation and leadership learning that has been taking place.
Program evaluation	Program Coordinator	Questionnaire to each participant, each sponsor and the Director DSR on the perceived outcomes of the program in terms of leadership capacity development.
Post program steps		
ABV Program report	Program Coordinator; Director DSR	Formal report on the program using the ABV templates and criteria
Post program review	Program Coordinator	Follow up email questionnaire with each participant 3 month after the completion of the on-site program to gather perceptions of leadership capacity gained during the program
Continuing on-line coaching / support	Program Coordinator	Provision of further advice, suggestions and support for each participant on request for a period of 6 months following the program.

Identification of the host organisation

The Department of Scientific Research (DSR) offered to serve as coordinating organisation of the program. Discussion between the Program Coordinator and the Director DSR established the parameters of the role of the host organisation which included:

- the identification of HEIs who would be likely to want to participate and who would benefit from having an executive representative participate in the program
- technical support in relation to the delivery of the workshop component and travel between participating organisations.

Program implementation

Eventually twelve (12) participants, representing four provincial and two city universities, were involved in the program from the initial eighteen identified by the Secretary of State. Other professional obligations prevented six participants from program involvement. The initial workshop was held at the premises of the Department of Scientific Research and served as an introduction to the program as well as enabling the facilitator and the participants to negotiate the focus for the whole of the program. The Director, Department of Scientific Research undertook the role of both participant and interpreter, and was able to clarify issues as they emerged, explain concepts that were not clear to the group, and raise questions from participants that could be directed to the program facilitator. Participants were invited to nominate times for up to three visits by the Program Coordinator for the purposes of executive coaching. Based on these preferred times, a final visit schedule was negotiated with each participant. Only one visit was possible to provincial universities, given the distances to be travelled. Participants were also invited to nominate a quality change that could be the focus for their leadership development during the program.

Component 1 - Workshop evaluations: Written evaluation questionnaire at the conclusion of each workshop to evaluate of the degree to which workshop extended participants' knowledge of quality management to support project implementation.

- Degree to which workshop sessions were relevant to leadership capacity
- Degree to which workshop themes were relevant to project implementation

- Degree to which workshop process facilitated discussion and learning
- Degree to which the session duration was adequate
- Degree to which session location and management were an appropriate learning environment
- Ways in which the workshop could have been improved

Component 2 - Purposeful dialogue evaluation: Program facilitator observation, and participant's feedback, of action learning discussions undertaken by participant triads in order to assess the degree to which discussion involvement enhanced communication skills

- Degree to which questions asked clarified project issues
- Degree to which questions asked supported project implementation
- Degree to which questions asked generated alternative options for action
- Degree to which the action learning sessions enhanced participant questioning skills
- Degree to which the action learning sessions enhanced participant listening skills
- Degree to which the action learning sessions remained focused on the fundamental purpose
- Any concerns participants had about being involved in the action learning sessions
- Ways in which the action learning session could be improved.

Component 3 - Coaching session evaluation: Semi-structured interview with each participant on the value of the executive coaching sessions to assess the degree to which these sessions supported leadership capacity building and project implementation.

- Degree to which the coaching sessions support project implementation
- Degree to which the coaching sessions identified areas for further leadership development
- Degree to which the coaching session contribute to leadership capacity building
- Degree to which the coaching sessions consolidated the content of the workshop sessions
- Ways in which the coaching sessions could have been improved

Component 4 - Project evaluation: Observation of each participant's project presentation and an interview with each sponsor to assess the degree to which the project served as a catalyst for leadership capacity building and as a development activity for the organisation.

- Degree to which project outcomes were achieved
- Degree to which the workshop contributed to project outcomes
- Degree to which coaching contributed to project outcomes
- Degree to which action learning sessions contributed to project outcomes
- Degree to which participants believed the program contributed to leadership capacity
- Degree to which sponsor believed program contributed to participant leadership capacity

Component 5 - Process evaluations: A written questionnaire completed by each participant to assess the degree to which the RADAR process provided a viable structure for executive action learning

Conclusion

It was found that the participating executives valued all components of the program as a learning process, as well as valuing the opportunity to share experience with colleagues. It was clear that, even with the assistance of an interpreter, developing a shared understanding of the concepts discussed during the seminar component presented a communication challenge. It was also clear that considerable follow-up in the form of, for example, a formal coaching program to provide individualised support on location would be important if the benefits of the program were to be fully realised. Further research is required to investigate the cultural and organizational factors that might need to be considered in the development of executive development programs that are appropriate to the learning needs of executives in Cambodian higher education.

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