

Leading With Fresh Eyes



AlburyCity

1 March 2025
Zhofi Bogari-Davykoza
Adam Carty

Learning to Lead

Introduction

Effective leadership transcends traditional notions of authority and control. The proposition of leading without formal authority poses an intriguing challenge and opportunity for development. This concept was recently tested, when the apprenticeship team, was charged with building a site office. During this project, formal hierarchical power was removed.

This project called for the Apprentice team to take the lead, while their trade qualified supervisors assume the apprentice role. This exploratory project delves into the effectiveness of AlburyCity's coaching approach within the apprenticeship context, specifically focusing on how leadership can be exercised and developed outside conventional structures. The essence of this inquiry revolves around trying to understand if leaders, even when not formally in charge, can be fostered and motivated, without the need for any monetised incentives.

Leadership in this context involves navigating the intricacies of self-efficacy, cognitive development, and social learning. Effective coaching and mentoring require a delicate balance between structured guidance and empathetic support. By creating an environment that encourages autonomy while providing necessary structure, leaders can enhance apprentices' capabilities and readiness for career advancement.

This project aims to assess the impact of AlburyCity's coaching methodologies on apprentices' professional and personal growth, evaluating how these approaches contribute to their development and readiness for future challenges. By integrating insights from leadership and coaching theories, this project seeks to uncover how leadership can be effectively practiced even in the absence of formal authority, shaping the path for both current and future leaders.

Project Background

The Wonga Wetlands project represents a significant endeavour in both development and experiential learning. The initial phase involves dismantling portable buildings to clear a site for new development. Given the need to accommodate displaced staff, the option of hiring a temporary site office was initially considered. However, the high cost associated with this solution led to the decision to explore more cost-effective alternatives.

Consequently, the decision was made to construct a modular office in-house. This choice not only aligned with our strategic goals but also presented a unique opportunity for the Apprentice Team. By taking on this project, the apprentices are engaged in tasks that fall within their apprenticeship scope but extend beyond the typical range of work provided by AlburyCity. This approach ensures that apprentices gain hands-on experience in project management, construction, and sustainable practices, all while contributing to a project of significant organisational value.

The modular office construction project serves as a practical learning platform, allowing apprentices to apply their skills in a real-world setting while navigating the complexities of building design and implementation. Under the guidance of trade-qualified supervisors, this initiative provides a rich learning environment where apprentices can develop their competencies, enhance their self-efficacy, and prepare for future career challenges.

The project was split into two main components:

- Coaching Through Leadership
- Apprentice-Led Construction

Coaching Through Leadership

Be the Coach You Needed

Leadership and coaching are profoundly shaped by our own experiences. Reflecting on the support and guidance we received—or wished we had received—early in our careers can provide valuable insights into how we approach coaching others. The idea of *being the person you needed as a coach when you started* revolves around leveraging personal experiences to create a more empathetic, supportive, and effective coaching environment.

By flipping the roles and asking apprentices to lead, we are presented with an opportunity to hold a mirror up to our coaching style and methodology. Promotion from an individual contributor to a leadership role often underestimates the complexity of this transition. The assumption that past success guarantees future leadership excellence is flawed. This project argues that traditional leadership training methods fall short in preparing new leaders for contemporary challenges. This element of the project proposes a methodology integrating real-time learning with a comprehensive view of leadership.

The results or success of this project rest with our ability to answer a few key questions.

1. Was the team confident enough to take on the challenge, with the understanding that they will need to do things they have never done before?

The team exhibited a commendable level of confidence in taking on the challenge, demonstrating a willingness to engage in tasks they had never encountered before. This willingness is a key indicator of a growth mindset, which is essential for personal and professional development. However, it is important to note that this confidence varied among team members and fluctuated over the course of the project.

From a neutral observer's standpoint, confidence is heavily influenced by previous experiences and the perceived support from supervisors and peers. For some team members, the novelty of the tasks initially sparked enthusiasm and a sense of adventure. Yet, as they faced unforeseen difficulties, their confidence was tested. This is a normal part of the learning process, where initial optimism may wane as the reality of new challenges sets in.

The team's confidence was further bolstered by a supportive environment where their efforts were acknowledged, and their progress was celebrated. However, instances where the more experienced tradies intervened could sometimes inadvertently undermine this confidence. It is crucial for mentors to strike a balance between providing guidance and allowing the team to independently navigate challenges, even making mistakes along the way.

To sustain and enhance the team's confidence, ongoing encouragement and positive reinforcement are vital. Building a resilient mindset where challenges are viewed as *opportunities for growth*, rather than obstacles, will further solidify their confidence in future endeavours.

2. Did supervisors, tradies and peers stand back, observe and resist the urge to take over. Did they challenge the team to try new things, without the fear of being chastised if things went wrong?

While the intention was for the supervisors, tradies, and peer colleagues to stand back and allow the team to fully take the lead, this objective was not entirely achieved. It proved challenging for some experienced tradies to resist the instinct to intervene and take over tasks. This is a common scenario in mentoring environments, where seasoned professionals may struggle to let go of control due to their deep investment in the project's success and their desire to share their expertise.

This behaviour is often described through the lens of the "expert paradox," where individuals with significant experience may find it difficult to adopt a hands-off approach. Some of the experienced members of the team, while well-intentioned, found it hard to simply observe and allow the team to make and learn from their mistakes. This tendency to step in can inadvertently undermine the development of the team's confidence and problem-solving skills. Moreover, while there was an effort to challenge the team to try new things without fear of judgement, the underlying anxiety of potential failure and the natural inclination to avoid errors created an environment where the fear of making mistakes was still present. To truly foster an atmosphere of innovation and fearless experimentation, it is essential to create a psychologically safe environment where mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities rather than failures.

3. What did we learn about ourselves

Reflecting on this experience, we have gained valuable insights into both individual and collective aspects of our team. Here are some key learnings:

Resilience and Adaptability

We discovered our capacity for resilience and adaptability in the face of unfamiliar challenges. The team's ability to step outside their comfort zones and tackle tasks they had never performed before demonstrated a strong growth mindset. This adaptability is a crucial strength, allowing us to navigate uncertainty and embrace new opportunities.

Confidence and Self-Efficacy

We learned about the varying levels of confidence within the team. While some members exhibited strong self-efficacy, others experienced fluctuations in their confidence as they encountered difficulties. This underscores the importance of continuous support and encouragement to foster a more uniformly confident team.

Leadership Dynamics

The experience highlighted the complex dynamics between leadership and team autonomy. We observed that while experienced tradies and supervisors intended to support the team, their interventions sometimes impacted the team's ability to lead independently. This has highlighted the need for a delicate balance between providing guidance and allowing autonomy.

Psychological Safety

We learned that creating a psychologically safe environment is essential for optimal performance. The fear of making mistakes and potential criticism can hinder creativity and innovation. Emphasising a culture where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities rather than failures is crucial for fostering a supportive and productive environment.

Communication = Listening + Talking

The process reinforced the importance of clear communication and constructive feedback. Effective communication ensures that expectations are understood and that feedback is delivered in a manner that supports growth and development, rather than causing discouragement.

Collaboration and Support

We observed the value of collaborative support and the impact it has on team morale and performance. Building a culture where team members support each other and celebrate collective successes enhances overall effectiveness and satisfaction.

Observations

While the supervisors and tradies made commendable efforts to support the team's autonomy, there remains room for improvement in fostering a culture of trust and resilience. It is crucial to continue working on strategies that promote psychological safety, encouraging the team to take risks and innovate without the fear of criticism or reprisal.

While the team showed significant confidence in embracing new challenges, there remains a need to continuously nurture and support this confidence through strategic mentorship and a strong emphasis on psychological safety and resilience-building.

This experience has provided us with a deeper understanding of our strengths and areas for growth. By acknowledging these insights, we can better equip ourselves to address challenges, support each other, and continually improve our approach to team dynamics and project management.

Learning to Lead: Apprentice-Led Construction

Introduction

Allowing apprentices to take charge of a construction project offers a wealth of practical experience that is critical for their development and the project's success. This hands-on opportunity enables apprentices to learn key aspects of project management, including task delegation, effective scheduling, and real-time problem-solving. By applying theoretical knowledge to practical scenarios, apprentices gain a deeper understanding of construction techniques, materials, and safety protocols. They also learn to navigate building codes, manage finances, and maintain accurate records. Additionally, apprentices develop essential skills in team supervision, communication, resource management, and quality control. This comprehensive approach not only enhances their technical and leadership abilities but also ensures the project meets all regulatory and quality standards, ultimately contributing to their professional growth and the project's overall success.

outcomes are listed as:

1. Build a completely dismantable site office

- Ensure the site office is modular, easy to assemble and disassemble, and can be transported and reused in different locations. It should meet all safety and building codes while incorporating sustainable design principles.

2. All project management and construction time to be led by the Apprentice Team

- Develop a structured timeline and clear milestones to follow. Provide ongoing training and mentorship to ensure apprentices have the skills and knowledge necessary to lead effectively. Implement regular progress reviews and feedback sessions to support their development.

3. The Trade qualified supervisors are to work for the apprentices and act as mentors

- Mentors should provide hands-on guidance and support, focusing on skill development and problem-solving. Establish a mentor-apprentice ratio to ensure adequate support and create a feedback loop where apprentices can share their experiences and suggestions for improvement.

4. The use of reused materials wherever possible

- Identify and source high-quality reused materials from reputable suppliers. Develop a procurement strategy that prioritises sustainability without compromising on quality. Track and report on the percentage of reused materials used in the project to demonstrate commitment to environmental responsibility.

To measure our success, we asked the project team a few key questions.

1. Do you think you were in charge?

Through this comprehensive approach, the apprentices not only enhanced their technical and leadership abilities but also ensured the project met all regulatory and quality standards, ultimately contributing to their professional growth and the project's overall success. The experience empowered them to take ownership, make decisions, and navigate the complexities of managing a construction project from start to finish.

2. How effective was the initial planning phase? What could have been improved?

The initial planning phase was executed effectively, with thorough engagement with the clients to understand their needs. Key actions included meetings with customers and site visits to finalise project requirements. However, the process also revealed areas for improvement. As the planning was largely managed independently, including material procurement and scheduling, it presented a significant learning curve, particularly due to the lack of prior project management experience. Greater oversight from an experienced builder or project manager could have enhanced the planning phase, providing clearer guidance and reducing uncertainties.

Execution and Problem-Solving

3. What were the most significant obstacles encountered during the process?

The most significant obstacles during the project included staffing challenges and leadership dynamics. A key difficulty was managing the workload with limited help, leading to delays and necessitating self-teaching of new skills, such as welding and panel installation. This shortage of manpower also meant that tasks originally assigned to others were taken on by the core team.

Another obstacle was the transition to a leadership role as an apprentice. Balancing the desire for autonomy with the need for direction posed challenges, as the shift from established practices to fresh approaches required navigating between traditional methods and innovative solutions.

Finally, having access to a builder during the execution phase could have been beneficial for addressing questions about structural integrity and ensuring compliance with standards.

Quality and Safety

4. Were there any quality or safety concerns during the project? How were they resolved?

In terms of quality, the project successfully produced a functional office space, complete with a kitchenette, deck, and large overhanging roof. The team researched and executed the work to the best of their abilities.

Safety concerns were notably and involved heightened awareness of potential hazards and risks. This fresh perspective proved valuable in identifying issues that might otherwise be overlooked. When safety concerns arose, particularly regarding execution practices, seeking

guidance from Senior Leaders proved helpful in addressing and resolving these issues.

Training and Development

5. How beneficial was the training and mentorship provided during the project?

Although formal training was not part of the project, the mentorship offered by the Electrical Supervisor was highly beneficial. He played a key role in facilitating communication between the apprentices and other teams, such as plumbing, electrical, and fitting. This support made it easier to express concerns and receive valuable feedback, significantly contributing to the project's success.

What skills were developed or improved during this project?

During the project, significant improvement was made in leadership skills. The experience challenged patience and fostered a deeper appreciation for the daily challenges faced by leaders. Additionally, the project provided valuable lessons in working with diverse types of workers and leaders, enhancing the understanding of different approaches and values in the workspace.

Outcome and Satisfaction

6. If you could change one thing about the project, what would it be and why?

If one aspect of the project could be changed, it would be to ensure that all materials and resources were fully prepared before starting work. This approach would have allowed the project to proceed more swiftly and efficiently, minimising delays and maximising the time available for learning during the apprenticeships.

Reflection and Future Improvements

7. What lessons have you learned from this project that can be applied to future projects?

From this project, valuable lessons include the importance of thorough planning and preparation before starting a job to ensure smooth execution. Additionally, the experience underscored the value of effectively working with a diverse range of workers, which will be beneficial for future projects.

Team Dynamics

8. How did team dynamics influence the project's success or challenges?

Team dynamics had a significant impact on the project's success and challenges. When the team was united and focused on a common goal, success was achieved. However, a lack of motivation affected the quality of work. Constant reminders of the need for mutual support and perseverance were crucial in maintaining momentum and overcoming obstacles.

Project Summary and Reflection

The initial planning phase of the project was well-executed through thorough client engagement and detailed preparations, though greater oversight from experienced builders could have improved clarity and reduced uncertainties. Key obstacles included staffing challenges and the transition to leadership roles, which highlighted the need for both practical skills and effective guidance. Despite the lack of formal training, mentorship from Mitch proved invaluable,

facilitating communication and support.

The project saw significant improvements in leadership skills and the ability to work with diverse teams. Looking back, ensuring all materials and resources are prepared before starting would enhance efficiency and reduce delays. Team dynamics played a crucial role; unity and shared motivation led to success, while a lack of motivation negatively impacted work quality. Overall, the experience underscored the importance of detailed planning, effective communication, and teamwork.

Budget Review

The cost to hire a site office for the duration of the project was quoted at \$42,000. The budget to build the office was set at 80% of the purchase price of a new portable office and 110% of the hire cost.

Noting that the additional 10% would be offset by the assets value on completion.

Item	Build	Buy*	Borrow #1*	Borrow #2*
Materials	\$24,915.96 (51%)	\$52,901.29 (94%)	\$42,000 (100%)	\$59,447.32 (100%)
Labour	\$24,139.51 (49%)	\$0 (0%)	\$0 (0%)	\$0 (0%)
Other cost	\$0 (0%)	\$3,174.08 (6%)	\$0 (0%)	\$0 (0%)
Total	\$49,055.47	\$56,075.37	\$42,000	\$59,447.32
Asset Value	\$49,055.47	\$52,901.29	\$0 (0%)	\$0 (0%)

** Is based on a calculation to construct or rent the same square footage. Borrow #1 option is based on an office floor space approximately half that of the office that was built.*

We found that building the office cost 82% of our budget. Hiring would have used 99% of the budget, and buying would have used 93%. By choosing to build, we spent 17% less than if we had hired and 12% less than if we had bought.

Conclusion

Leadership, in its truest essence, transcends formal authority and position. It is an art of influence and empowerment, a process deeply intertwined with understanding, growth, and the human spirit. The two parts to the same project illuminates this principle through its approach to apprenticeship and leadership.

At its core, effective leadership in the apprenticeship context is less about wielding power and more about nurturing potential. The project demonstrates that true leadership emerges not solely from the position one holds but from the ability to inspire, guide, and support others towards their own achievements. By adopting a coaching perspective that emphasis empathy, autonomy, and constructive feedback, leaders can foster an environment where apprentices not only learn but thrive.

The insights gained reveal that confidence and competence are cultivated through a balance of challenge and support. As apprentices encountered new responsibilities, their growth was propelled by a supportive framework that encouraged risk-taking and resilience. This reflects the idea that leadership is a journey of mutual development, where both leader and apprentice evolve through shared experiences and learning.

Furthermore, the project underscores the importance of psychological safety and self-reflection. These elements are vital in creating a space where individuals feel secure in their learning process, contributing to their overall effectiveness and growth. This aligns with the broader view that the quality of leadership is deeply connected to the leader's ability to create a nurturing environment that supports continuous development.

In conclusion, these projects affirm that leadership is not confined to formal roles but is an ongoing practice of empowering others. It challenges us to rethink traditional notions of authority and embrace a more nuanced approach that values empathy, growth, and collaboration. By leading through influence rather than command, we not only enhance the capabilities of those we mentor but also advance towards a more inclusive and effective model of leadership.