



Institute for
Public Policy
and Governance

Strengthening Leaders:

Learning and Development Options for
Senior Staff in Local Government



This report has been prepared by Sophi Bruce and Kane Pham, Institute for Public Policy and Governance, University of Technology Sydney as part of a research project funded by Local Government NSW.

We acknowledge the contribution from Sarah Artist from Local Government NSW and the members of the NSW Local Government Workforce Development Reference Group and advisory group stakeholders who provided research guidance and input into this project. We would also like to acknowledge the NSW Public Service Commission's permission to draw on the Capability Discovery Tool for the purposes of this research.

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Executive Summary

The Institute for Public Policy and Governance at the University Technology Sydney (UTS IPPG) undertook research on behalf of Local Government NSW (LGNSW) and the NSW Local Government Workforce Development Reference Group (LGWDRF) to investigate professional development options for senior staff in council organisations.

This project aligns with wider local government workforce strategies building on previous research that aims to strengthen the capability of the local government sector. Intended outcomes from these strategies include i) a resilient local government workforce that attracts and retains highly skilled employees and ii) capacity to influence policy and decision making that enables best possible outcomes for local communities.

The aim of this research project is to produce a learning resource tailored to general managers and directors in NSW local government that will guide the development of 'highly advanced' skills and behaviours as described in the LGNSW Local Government Capability Framework. In particular, this research includes:

- > A desktop review of current thinking and research on development options for senior staff and executives
- > Engagement with local government professional development stakeholders and senior staff
- > A suite of options corresponding to the highly advanced behaviours outlined in the Local Government Capability Framework that includes a mix of on-the-job activities, social learning and formal training options as per the 70-20-10 model of learning and development
- > Establishment of an online tool specifically targeted at developing the highly advanced skills and behaviours outlined in the Local Government Capability Framework

The **desktop review** revealed that there are high expectations of leadership capability of senior staff. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to developing leadership abilities and that a combination of assessment and training methods is best placed to address their needs. For senior staff, stretch assignments ranked highly for developing abilities, with leadership coaching and 360-degree feedback also considered effective. Organisational outcomes are deemed better when leaders are invested in learning strategies and when senior staff engage in learning and development activities. However, it is suggested that senior staff can experience difficulties in integrating learnings into their organisation and day-to-day practices. Further barriers for development included demonstrating the value of programs and lack of a statutory requirement in NSW to engage in professional development programs.

The **engagement** with stakeholders involved in senior staff development in NSW councils provided important perspectives and considerations when appraising learning and development options for this level of local government. These include:

- > *Ability to manage change:* Leading in local government requires a careful balance, with staff expected to negotiate changing societal contexts, political pressures, and technological innovations. Council operations are challenged by increasing fiscal compression and regulatory requirements. In tandem, rapidly changing online and social spaces require more agile ways of working, both internally within the organisation and externally with the community.
- > *Balancing technical skills and personal development:* Senior staff need to be all-rounders. Responses suggest that while developing interpersonal skills is an area of particular need for senior staff they also require technical training to help day-to-day decisions that relate to finance, assets and infrastructure.
- > *Integration of learning:* Although our respondents indicated a variable level of learning and development across councils, there was a general acknowledgement that it was difficult to integrate learnings into their organisation. In addition to leadership programs and learning

through networking, there is a need for learning on the job. Senior staff must also be able to recognise their own knowledge gaps and seek out resources that support self-development.

- > *Formal recognition:* The lack of a statutory requirement to maintain professional development means that senior staff working in local government do not have a training benchmark. Suggestions include establishing a baseline qualification, self-driven learning and an ongoing professional development points scheme that encourages self-awareness of development needs.
- > *Requirement for more sector-specific resources:* Although there is a range of programs available to senior staff, courses need to be better tailored to those leading in local government. This is particularly urgent for staff in regional and rural areas who face different challenges to those working for metropolitan councils.
- > *The need for partner councils:* Partnerships of councils and regional organisations of councils (ROCs), could help gather support and communicate learning and development needs. Although this strategy may be more important for regional and rural councils, it may also benefit metropolitan ones that face the same or similar problems on a daily basis. Secondments to other councils could also be explored.
- > *Strengthening relationships between the executive arms of local government:* A lack of clear communication and cooperation between elected members and senior staff is seen as a significant hindrance to the daily operation of councils. Respondents indicated that the Local Government Capability Framework provides a means to discuss responsibilities and the assessment of senior staff members' abilities and helps to temper these conflicts.

An **online resource** (<http://ssdevelop.lgnsw.org.au>) has been established as an outcome of this research. It provides the sector with options for learning and development for senior staff in local government, which are aligned to the 70-20-10 model of learning and the Local Government Capability Framework. Stakeholders involved in this research were generally in favour of this type of resource. It is recognised that as a tool, it requires managing and updating and that it would need to operate as a stand-alone resource as it would be difficult to integrate it with other systems. An open resource was generally supported although it is acknowledged that the content may overlap with similar offers from current training providers.

Using the online resource in conjunction with performance conversations was generally supported, but with the caveat that this would only be effective in environments where trust and commitment to learning are favoured. Further suggestions included a possible self and/or peer-assessment function to help identify capability area needs.

Strategies to encourage further engagement and use of the tool include: linking it to salary negotiations and promotions; co-designing the tool with users; gaining advocacy from the senior leadership team; extending the resource to the whole organisation to encourage a learning and capability-building culture.

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1 Introduction

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The aim of this research project is to produce a learning resource tailored to general managers and directors in NSW local government to help guide the development of the 'highly advanced' skills and behaviours as described in the LGNSW Local Government Capability Framework. In particular, this research includes:

- > A desktop review of current thinking and research on development options for senior staff and executives
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- > A suite of options corresponding to the highly advanced behaviours outlined in the Local Government Capability Framework that includes a mix of on-the-job activities, social learning and formal training options as per the 70-20-10 model of learning and development
- > Establishment of an online resource tool specifically targeted at developing the highly advanced skills and behaviours outlined in the Local Government Capability Framework

This project involved three stages.

1.1 Stage One – Review

Stage one included a desktop review of current thinking and research on leadership development in general and then more specifically on senior staff development in local government in Australia. The review revealed that while there is a significant body of work examining leadership and development in general, only a small portion deals with senior and executive leaders, especially in the public sector and that resources that address the particular development needs of senior and executive staff in Australian local government remains limited. This sets the ground for developing timely research and sharing insights into the challenges and opportunities facing senior staff development in local government in NSW.

The review phase included engagement with the Local Government Workforce Development Reference Group (LGWDRG) as part of an advisory group to help guide the scope and frame the survey and research questions. The advisory group included representatives from:

- > Local Government NSW
- > The Office of Local Government
- > Local Government Professionals New South Wales
- > Centre for Local Government, University of Technology Sydney
- > Institute of Public Works Engineering Australia
- > NSW councils

Engagement with the Public Service Commission NSW also contributed to the review and research phases.

1.2 Stage Two – Survey

An online survey was conducted with nearly 200 professionals working in and with local government across a range of rural, regional and metropolitan councils in NSW. The survey asked questions relating to:

- > Perspectives of Learning & Development (L&D) from different employee groups
- > The importance of different learning and professional development options
- > The preferred mode of delivery for the structured professional development of current and aspiring senior staff
- > Barriers inhibiting the advancement of senior staff members' leadership skills and behaviours
- > The effectiveness of resources and learning strategies that develop senior staff attributes

1.2.1 Methodology

Responding to the Local Government Capability Framework, we engaged with the LGWDRG to explore initial ideas on how an online resource may be utilised by L&D/HR staff, councillors and senior staff.

A LGNSW database that includes L&D/HR staff, councillors and senior staff was used to select a range of participants across NSW in a variety of metropolitan, regional and rural councils. This diversity ensured that a broad range of perspectives would be gathered.

The survey asked a series of quantitative (ranked) and qualitative (open response) questions. The open responses were coded and grouped into thematic categories to draw relationships between the review, survey and interview data.

1.3 Stage Three – Interviews

Interviews were conducted with general managers, L&D/HR staff, elected members, and learning professionals working in organisations providing services to local government. The interviews aimed to gather more specific insights into the experiences of those working on both sides of L&D implementation.

These open-ended conversations provided thematic observations that give a better picture of the specific challenges and opportunities facing local governments when training their senior staff.

1.4 Stage Four – Online Resource Development & Recommendations

The desktop research, survey and interviews have guided the design of an online resource tool tailored to senior staff that includes options for learning based on the 70-20-10 learning and development model. The webpage for this resource is located at <http://ssdevelop.lgnsw.org.au>. Many of these options are applicable to senior staff development in general and have been aligned to capability attributes. While development options have been collected with senior staff in mind, many of the resources and ideas could have applicability to all levels of leadership within council organisations.

Recommendations for implementation and management of this resource tool were also included as part of this phase.

2 Desktop Research: Literature Review

2.1 Leadership Development Research

While there is a significant body of work examining leadership and development in general, only a small portion deals with senior and executive leaders, especially in the public sector. Research covering senior staff in Australian local government remains limited. Although specific in its needs, local government in Australia faces many of the challenges that exist in larger public and private organisations.¹

Recent studies have found differing perspectives on leadership development, ranging from 'important but not strategic'² to being regarded as a 'positive link between executive education and organisational productivity.'³ One view states that, 'By recognizing the importance of people to business success, companies can create cultures, performance management systems and development programs that translate into significant competitive advantage in their markets.'⁴

Prior to addressing the leadership and development of senior staff, organisations need to ensure that the appropriate processes and governance frameworks are in place to support open dialogue from staff at all levels, as well as the integration of development activities into the business. In its examination of leadership development strategies aimed at supporting senior staff, this literature review assumes these processes are in place.

This review provides wider contextual thinking to help frame learning tailored to senior staff members' development needs.

2.2 Executive Development

When compared to research conducted a generation ago, current approaches to executive development remain similar overall. Differences, however, are apparent when considering the pace of change, products available to assist with development, speed of technological innovation and changes in workforce composition.⁵ A recent survey conducted by Massey University examining the needs of executive education from a wide range of sectors found that organisations, as a whole, face similar challenges.⁶

¹ Acknowledging the breadth of material on leadership and development research, we began this review by asking the question, 'Why does executive leadership development matter?' Existing leadership frameworks from a range of Australian state and local governments and learning frameworks were then reviewed. A literature search was limited to academic articles published since 2012 using specific search terms in various combinations, including "leadership development", "learning + public sector leadership", "innovation + local government leadership", "innovation + leadership + public service", "leadership development + local government + executive", and "executive development + leadership + competencies". This stage of scoping was followed by reviewing consultancy reports and surveys, trade publication articles and academic reports and publications released since 2014.

² Harvard Business Publishing 2016a. *The State of Leadership Development*, Research Report. Harvard Business: Brighton, MA, p. 4.

³ IMNZ 2017. *New Zealand Executive Education Survey*, p. 21.

⁴ Mercer 2013. *Asia Pacific Leadership Development Practices Study Report*, p. 47.

⁵ Bolt, J.F. 1985. Tailor executive development to strategy. *Harvard Business Review*, 63(6), pp.168-176; Hagemann, B. 2018. The Two Complex Challenges Confronting Leaders Today - Executive Development, *Executive Development*, viewed 25 June 2018, <<https://www.executivedevelopment.com/two-complex-challenges-confronting-leaders-today/>>.

⁶ IMNZ 2017.

A rapidly changing workforce presents challenges to senior staff, especially technological impacts such as the pervasiveness of social media. As a counterpoint to these societal changes, the literature suggests that as one moves up the hierarchy of an organisation towards senior and executive levels, face-to-face engagement and training becomes a more effective tool for development. These approaches, however, need to be tailored to each individual and staff must be given support to integrate their learning experiences into their workflow.

Bolt's (1985) elements of development programs have provided useful parameters for us in the initial framing of options for a development resource for senior staff. From the six common threads that were drawn out, we have developed four, in conjunction with our review of the literature, that more closely correspond to this piece of research:

- **Objectives are clearly articulated:** The objectives need to be clearly and succinctly defined, be achievable and address the organisation's goals
- **The strategy can be implemented:** Many development programs have idealised learning objectives but no way to effectively integrate them into the organisation. These objectives should address senior staff and business goals
- **Management is involved in the program design:** Senior staff should be sufficiently invested in L&D strategies. This communicates an intent to self-improve that influences staff at all levels
- **Senior executives act as mentors:** As well as engaging with their direct reports, senior staff should have open lines of communication with all staff to gain insights from staff at all levels, and to disseminate the organisational strategy and goals. As well as operating as an open forum, these exchanges build trust in the organisation

2.3 Methods & Training

From the literature, we have catalogued a series of assessment methods, training and development pathways for senior staff and some of the barriers to implementing these L&D strategies. Table 1 summarises the results.

Table 1. Matrix of leadership and development assessment, pathways and barriers

Assessment tools	Training and development	Barriers to implementation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 360-degree feedback > Competency assessment (e.g. LGNSW 'PD in a box') > Career achievement record > Personality questionnaires > Structured developmental interview > Assessment centres > Cultural/motivational/fit assessment – interview process > External psychologist evaluation > Cognitive tests > Pre-evaluation organisation audit – evaluation of the governance structure, clarity of strategy and channels of communication available to all staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Stretch assignments – challenging development opportunities > Leadership coaching – external > Leadership coaching – internal > Action learning programs and experiential development activities > Blended learning > Online learning > 70-20-10 framework > Individual development plans > Further post-graduate higher education > Defined career paths for developing leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Perceptions of L&D among L&D staff, business and senior staff > Unable to demonstrate value > Unable to implement learned skills into the business > Conflict with previous performance management programs > System and ecosystem issues rather than individuals – leadership frameworks > Lack of support and buy-in from senior staff

2.3.1 Assessment Tools

A variety of assessment tools are available to leadership and development staff. When evaluating senior staff, 360-degree feedback, competency assessment and career achievement records are the most common forms of assessment. Although there are merits to each method, a multiple-assessment approach yielding overlapping information is generally more accurate than a single approach.⁷ Considering the interrelationship between executives working in different sectors and different regions, it is useful to benchmark capabilities across sectors to examine both the overlap and distinctiveness of local government requirements as data is often drawn across disciplinary boundaries.

2.3.2 Training and Development

As with assessment tools, there is a range of development tools that vary in ease of use, pervasiveness, effectiveness and cost. A tailored approach is most beneficial for senior staff. A Mercer study found the most effective programs for local government (i.e. those with the highest percentage of 'very effective' ratings) included stretch assignments (48%), rotational experiences (39%), leadership coaching by external coaches (30%), action learning programs (27%) and leadership coaching delivered by internal coaches (25%).⁸

The high rating of stretch assignments suggests that giving senior staff challenging assignments to complete while 'on the job' is more likely to improve performance than any other method. On the other hand, e-learning and classroom learning yielded the lowest scores (10% and 9% respectively). An Institute of Management New Zealand (IMNZ) survey found similar affinities among executive staff, with individual coaching the most preferred option (55.2%), followed by blended learning (40.2%) and experiential learning (32.2%).⁹

2.3.3 Barriers to Implementation

As indicated in our development of Bolt's elements of development programs articulated in Section 2.2, there is a number of barriers to the successful development and implementation of L&D programs for senior staff. A key barrier is the difficulty of demonstrating the value and the return on investment on development programs. Often L&D managers have difficulty demonstrating the business value of these programs, a finding backed by a recent Harvard Business report.¹⁰ Even best-in-class L&D programs have trouble demonstrating value and this makes advocating for more L&D investment even more difficult for organisations with fledgling L&D programs.

2.3.4 Local Government Act 1993

Section 232 (1)(g) legislates that it is the role of the councillor to 'make all reasonable efforts to acquire and maintain the skills necessary to perform the role of a councillor' while Section 335 does not require a general manager to maintain a requisite selection of skills to perform their role.¹¹ However, Section 338 (1) legislates that 'the general manager and other senior staff of a council are to be employed under contracts that are performance-based.' This requires senior staff to take charge of their role and suggests that greater integration is needed with HR/L&D staff, not just business managers, to support the development of L&D programs.

This also requires L&D staff to find ways to communicate the benefits of L&D activities and justify them to the organisation.

⁷ Mercer 2013.

⁸ Mercer 2013, p. 24.

⁹ IMNZ 2017, p. 16.

¹⁰ Harvard Business Publishing 2016a.

¹¹ *Local Government Act 1993* s232; s335; s338. Available at http://www5.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/consol_act/lga1993182/

2.3.5 Employee Engagement

Collecting the perspectives of employees through an anonymous survey is one effective tool within an employee engagement initiative. It can provide important feedback data about the perceived performance of senior staff.¹²

Organisations where senior staff are perceived as being highly capable have more engaged workforces. There is growing evidence that increased employee engagement leads to better outcomes including higher productivity and performance, a reduction in costs, increased employee retention, reduced sickness, absence and stress, better customer service, greater creativity, and improved wellbeing and morale, as well as making the organisation more attractive to talent.¹³

Recent UTS IPPG research using a *People Matter* survey tailored to local government in NSW can help us to align areas of perceived capability need to a resource that assists the design of development options.¹⁴ Results from the study reveal that senior managers tend to be less positively perceived than direct managers. Less than half of the respondents have positive perceptions of senior managers in areas such as communicating strategic objectives, providing direction, encouraging innovation, and displaying leadership and collaboration. A high proportion of respondents chose ‘neither agree nor disagree’ when answering questions about senior managers, suggesting that further communication of senior management roles and functions could be beneficial. Questions asking whether leaders demonstrated collaboration and led change were areas most likely to attract a combination of ‘neither agree nor disagree’ or negative responses from respondents. Almost a third of respondents perceive that change is not well handled in their organisation.

2.3.6 The Role of Sector Stakeholders in the Leadership and Development of Senior Staff

The relative lack of empirical evidence surrounding L&D of senior staff in the local government sector suggests that there is space for sector stakeholders to deliver full-service performance assessment and to broker appropriate development options. Members of the LGWDRF are already well positioned in the sector, suggesting there is scope for this reference group to lead in this space.

2.3.7 Leader-led Development

The increasingly complex challenges facing local government require the advocacy of leadership development from executive and senior staff. A combination of new technical skills, changing workforce composition, and organisational development require leaders to not only demonstrate leadership capabilities but to also mentor emerging leaders and shape the organisational culture to promote self-directed development pathways.

Previous UTS IPPG research, *Council Approaches to Leadership*,¹⁵ revealed that council organisations with better approaches to leadership development have senior executives who recognise the value of professional development for themselves and for staff across the organisation.

¹² Grant, A et al., 2018, Employee Surveys are still one of the best ways to measure engagement, *Harvard Business Review*, March 14th. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2018/03/employee-surveys-are-still-one-of-the-best-ways-to-measure-engagement>

¹³ Whittington, JL et al., 2017, Employee Engagement – Why it Matters. In *Enhancing Employee Engagement – An Evidence Based Approach*, Chapter 1, Springer International Publishing

¹⁴ Bruce, S. 2017, *People Matter for Local Government*. University of Technology Sydney

¹⁵ Bruce, S 2015, *Council Approaches to Leadership*. University of Technology Sydney



Positioning leaders as teachers¹⁶ not only reduces hierarchical friction, it also gives senior staff greater insight into the dynamics of their organisation and helps employees draw a greater connection between their assignments and the outcomes of their work.

2.4 Summary

It is apparent that although there is no template or one-size-fits-all approach to senior staff development, there could be significant value in generating an evaluation system tailored to specific industries such as local government in NSW. The research suggests that multiple assessment methods leads to increased accuracy and utility of assessment and should be considered by L&D staff, as well as senior staff as they reflect on their performance and its impact on their organisation.

Although the principles of current development programs are similar to past approaches, the development of senior staff is shaped by fast-paced social and technical changes that affect working relationships among senior staff and their organisation. This is especially important given the workforce trends identified in the *People Matter* research. The next stage of research engaging qualitative research methods will support the development of a targeted bundle of resources and development directions for senior staff working in local government.

¹⁶ Harvard Business Publishing 2016b, *How to turn your busy leaders into the teachers they need to be*. Harvard Business: Brighton, MA.

3 Survey Results

On online survey was conducted of nearly 200 professionals working in and with local government across a range of rural, regional and metropolitan councils in NSW. The survey aimed to collect perspectives on:

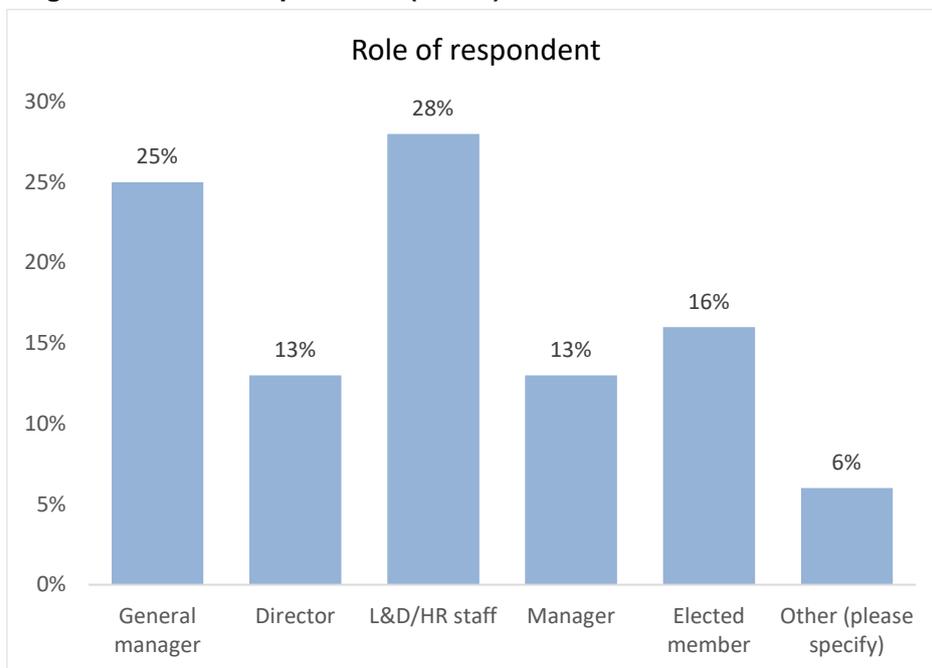
- > The value of different learning and professional development options
- > The preferred mode of delivery for structured professional development of current and aspiring senior staff
- > Barriers inhibiting the advancement of senior staff members' leadership skills and behaviours
- > The effectiveness of resources and learning strategies that develop senior staff attributes

The survey asked a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions. The following synthesis presents tabulated results from the quantitative responses, key quotations from the qualitative responses, and additional findings arising from the research.

3.1 Respondents, Their Location & Geographical Considerations

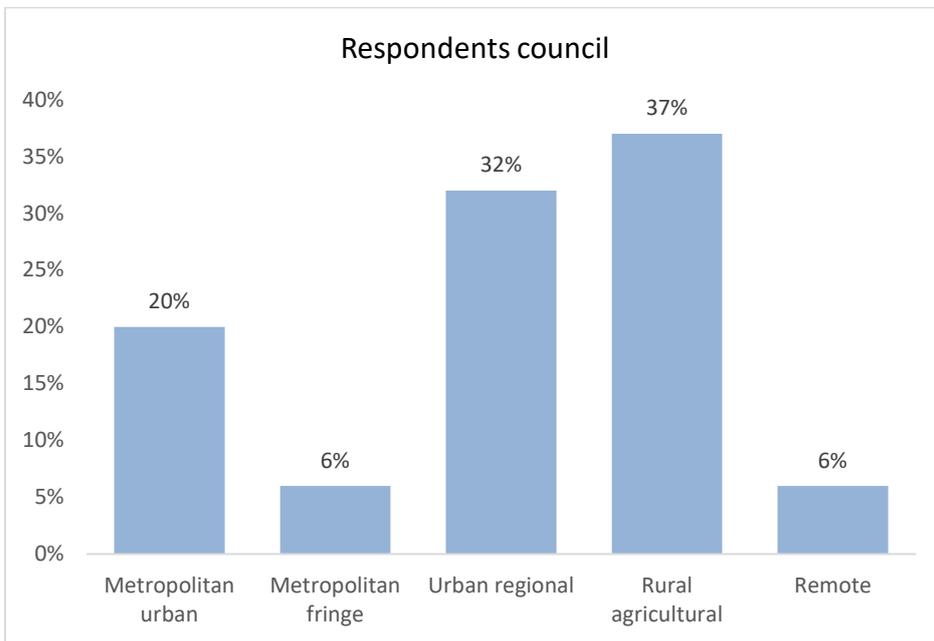
The 199 respondents were located across NSW and held a range of senior, managerial and L&D roles. The majority of respondents in the 'Other' category were acting general managers and mayors.

Figure 1. Role of respondents (n=199)



As Figure 2 shows, participants came from a range of council types to form a representative sample. Rural agricultural and urban regional councils were dominant in this survey comprising 37% and 32% respectively.

Figure 2. Location of councils (n=199)



Of note when considering the range of leadership programs available is the lack of tailored programs addressing the challenges of working in a local government context, as indicated in the survey responses below. Many programs are designed for state government staff. Secondly, there is the compounding challenge of working in a regional or, more significantly, a rural context.

We are remote and the additional cost of travel and accommodation puts us at a disadvantage

Consider regional capacity when costing training opportunities for this and other groups of employees

NSW is not just "Newcastle, Sydney and Wollongong", the rest is where the real challenges and diversity are

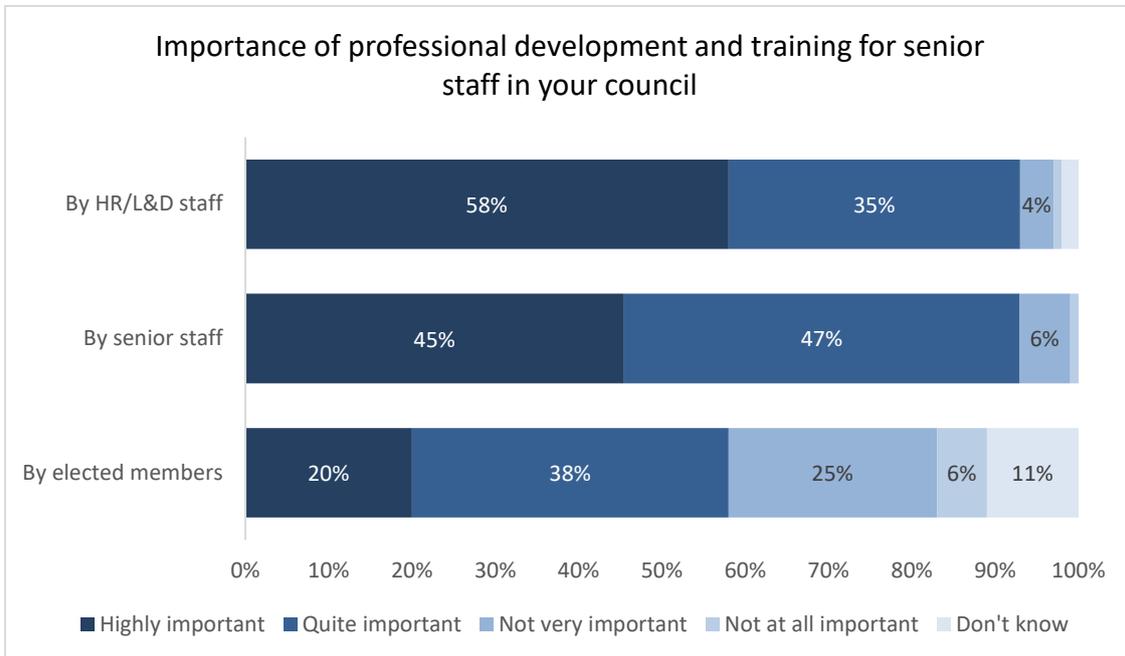
There needs to be development of a holistic system of management resources aimed specifically at local government

Resources need to be relevant and relatable to local government professionals

3.2 The Importance of Professional Development and Training

Professional development and training was considered important by all respondents. Unsurprisingly, professional development and training was most highly regarded among HR/L&D staff, with 58% describing it as 'Highly important'. This was followed by senior staff, with 45% selecting 'Highly important', as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Perspectives on the importance of professional development and training (n=190)



Respondents indicated a need for specific training that develops the skills of local government leaders in a way that directly addresses problems in the sector. Our respondents also suggested that professional development should be in line with other sectors that require members to attain points in order to show that they are keeping up to date with a mix of technical and interpersonal skills.

There is a huge developmental gap developing and/or already in existence

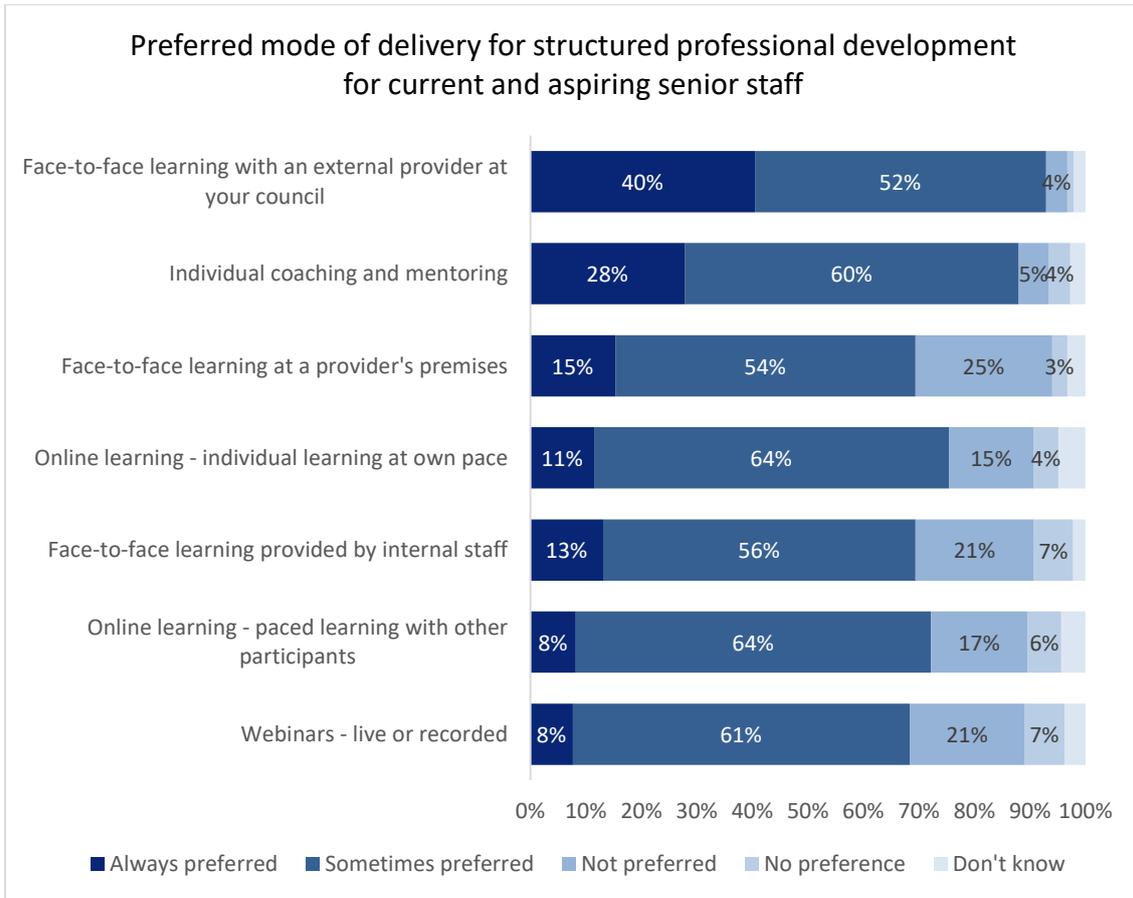
An approach of continued professional development with a requirement to keep up to date – Continuing Professional Development (CPD) points scheme or the like

Ensure there is focus on modern people management practices and leadership, not just technical information

3.3 Preference for Leadership Skills Delivery

When asked about the preferred mode of delivery for the professional development of senior staff, most respondents favoured 'Face-to-face learning with an external provider at your council', with 40% rating it 'Always preferred'. 'Individual coaching and mentoring' and 'Face-to-face learning at a provider's premises' rounded out the top three options, described as 'Always preferred' by 28% and 15% respectively. The rest of the preferences can be seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Preference for the delivery of structured professional development for senior staff (n=183)



When asked about factors that influence decisions about professional development tools and providers, our respondents placed 'Quality of provider' highest on the list, with 67% rating it 'Very important'. 'Learning outcomes are aligned to organisational strategic objectives' and 'Learning outcomes are aligned to individual capability needs' were the next highly ranked, with 55% and 50% respectively rating them as 'Very important'. The remaining factors can be seen in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Factors important to the selection of professional development options (n=184)



When asked open questions, our respondents indicated that there was value in connecting councils to form intra-council leadership networks and learning structures. This could work together with secondment programs to equip senior staff with a greater understanding and of working in neighbouring councils.

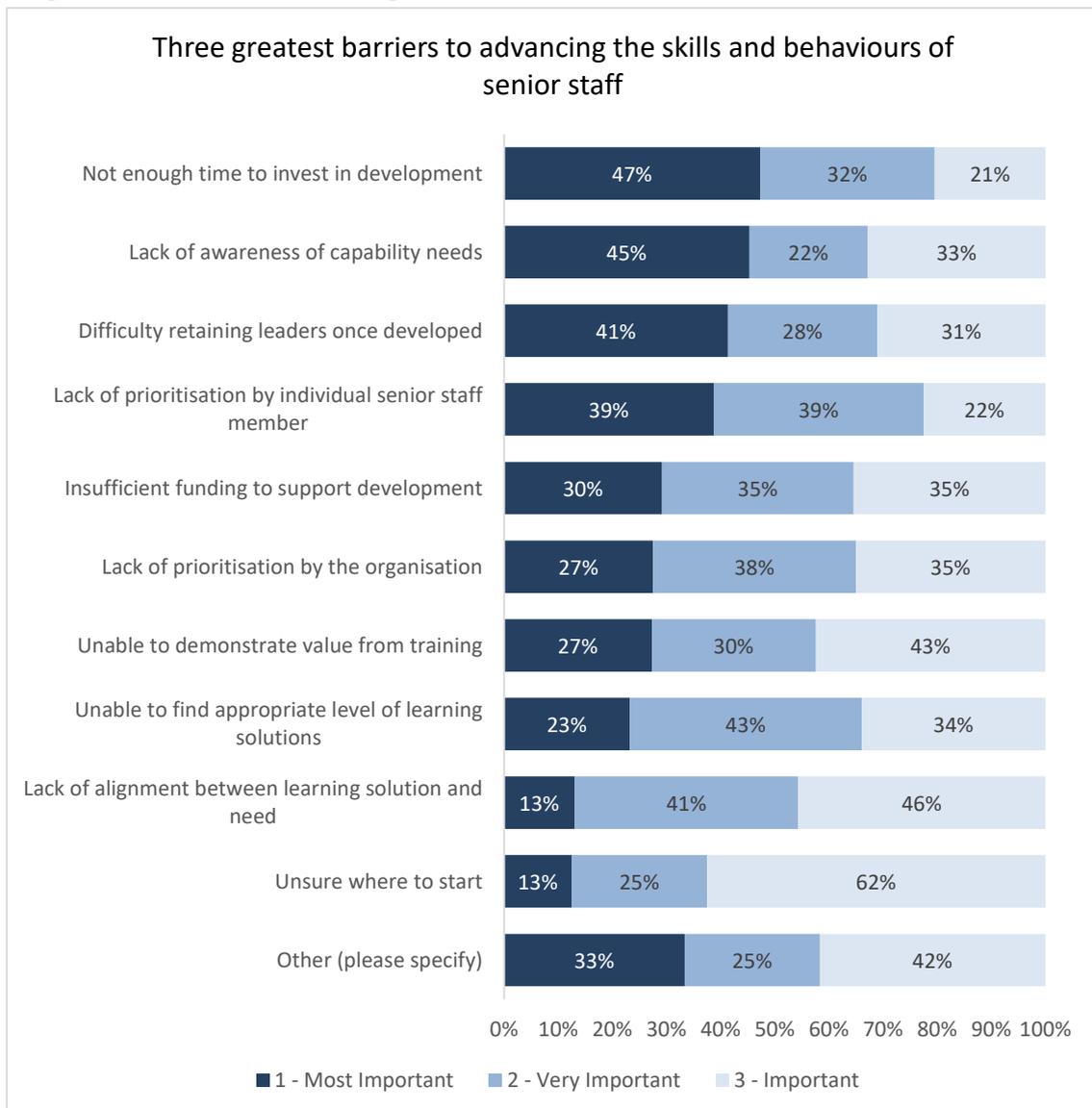
Connecting councils together, e.g. intra-council leadership forums, leadership networks, and leadership coaching

A structured secondment program would be helpful – with the ability to move staff between participating councils for 3-4 months at a time

3.4 Barriers Inhibiting the Advancement of Leadership Skills

When asked about the barriers inhibiting the advancement of senior staff members' leadership skills, our respondents rated 'Not enough time to invest in development' as the most significant inhibitor, with 47% ranking it highest. 'Lack of awareness of capability needs' and 'Difficulty retaining leaders once developed' followed closely, with 45% and 41% respectively. Other challenges are listed in Figure 6 below. Responses categorised under 'Other' mostly referred to distance from training locations and the cost of training options.

Figure 6. Barriers to advancing the skills of senior staff



In line with these results, some respondents also indicated that senior staff need to work more closely with L&D/HR staff to create tailored development programs. In addition, some councils struggle to release all members of their senior team at once for group training. But most pressing is the need for senior staff to be self-aware of their own ability levels, and to be personally accountable for their own development and training needs.

Senior staff don't tend to consult with HR about their own professional development, nor do we track or evaluate the development they undertake

It is often very difficult to release senior staff as a group for training and keep the organisation functioning. Self-paced training is a good option to deal with this but does not have the interaction with others

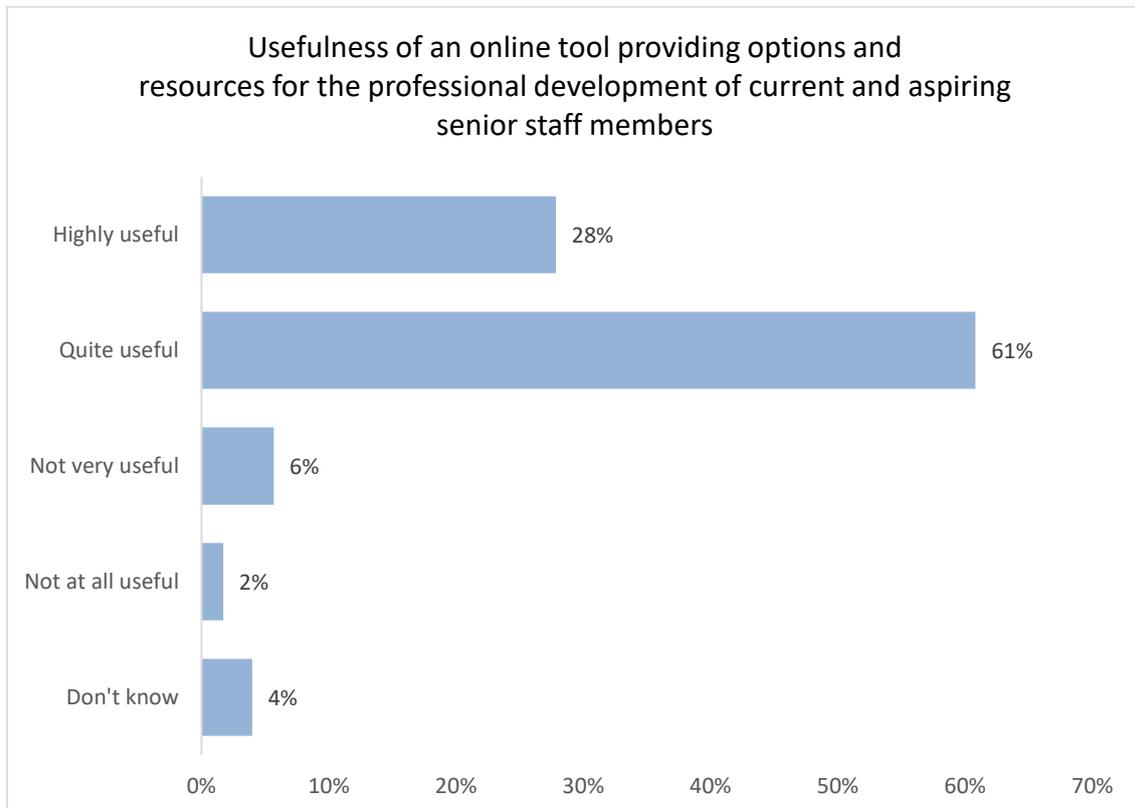
Some senior staff need to be aware of their own limitation. When they have made a mistake, they should learn from the error, not try to cover it up

Self-awareness is the first piece of the puzzle... [we] need to move people from unconscious incompetence, to conscious incompetence, to unconscious competence, to conscious competence

3.5 Effectiveness of Leadership Resources

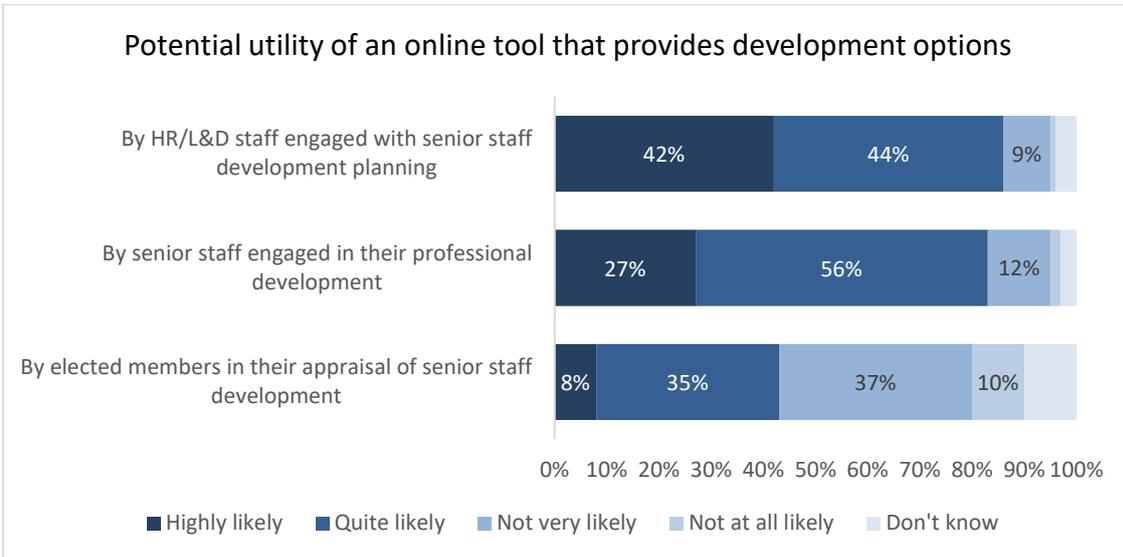
Our respondents indicated that the development of an online tool providing development options would be highly regarded, with 89% rating it at least 'Quite useful'.

Figure 7. Usefulness of an online tool for development options (n=176)



Opinions on the utilisation of this tool, as shown in Figure 8, suggest that it will be most helpful to HR/L&D staff when assisting senior staff with their development planning (42%). The remaining responses can be seen in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Utility of an online tool providing development options (n=182)



When our respondents were asked for further thoughts or ideas regarding which resources or options were useful for the professional development of current and aspiring senior staff, rather than communicating the effectiveness of resources, they spoke of their shortcomings. As mentioned earlier, there needs to be industry-recognised programs that are tailored specifically to senior staff working in local government.

Another comment, which related specifically to the changing landscape, fiscal imbalances and the devolution of local government responsibilities, mentioned the need for staff to become more commercially minded. In addition to collaborating with other councils, lessons can be learned from the private sector, which could increase the appeal of local government and leverage efficiencies often attributed to the private sector.

Many resources are very broad or not specific to the environment we work in. An example would be the Company Directors courses which are great, but could be much better for local government with focus

Our council has, in recent months, placed significant emphasis on capabilities around Evidenced-based decision making....[we] have not been satisfied with the units of competence available to us to achieve this. Things I'd like to see in the training would include: Collecting and analysing evidence; Quantitative and Qualitative research – what are they and how can you do it; Basic Stats analysis; Factors that influence decision making – biases, values, ethics; Take a look at a decision making model and unpack its value

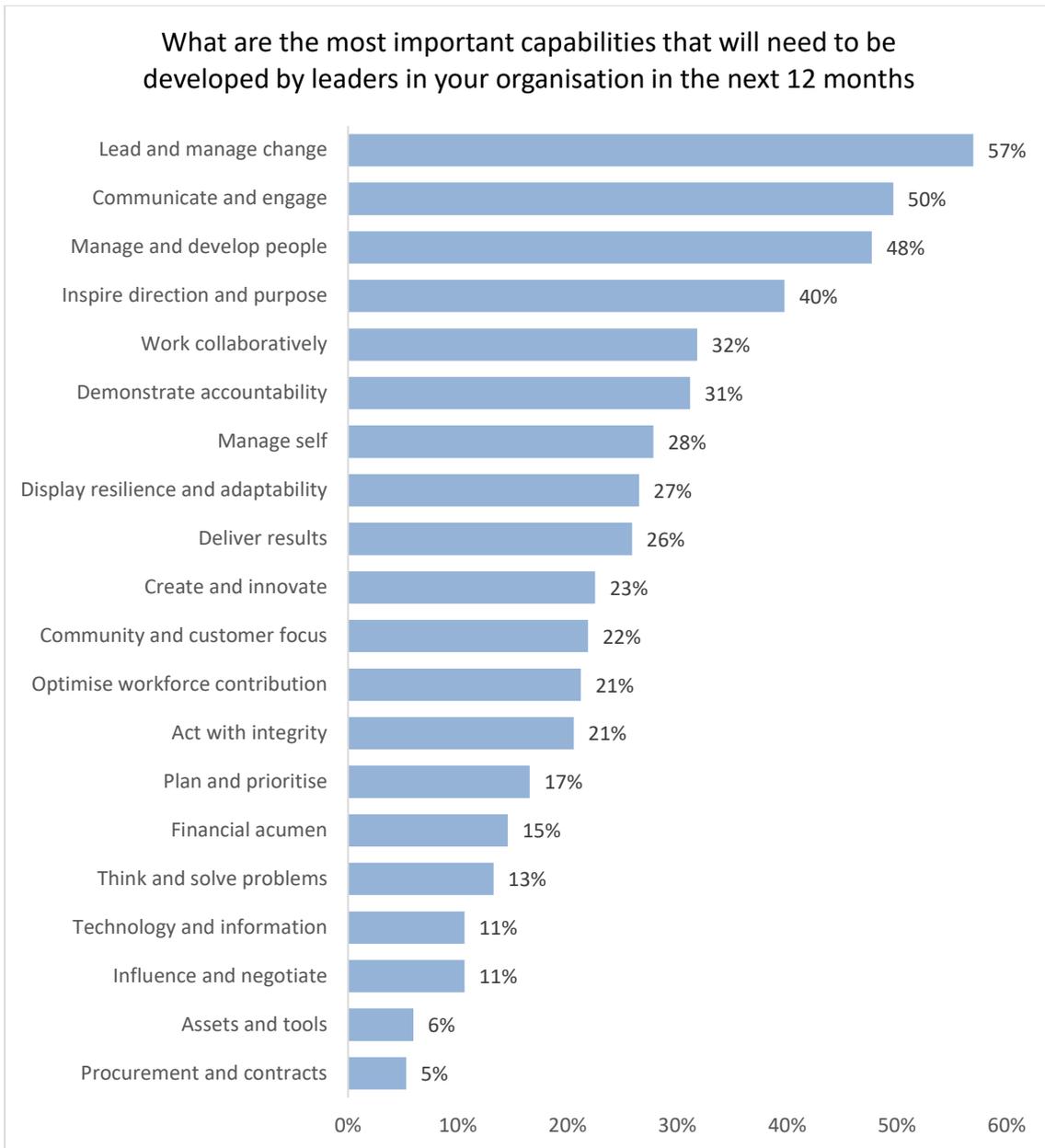
More attention needs to be given to encouraging local government leaders to think commercially and to motivate and empower staff to deliver results

3.6 Future Leadership Priorities

We asked our respondents to consider what are likely to be the most important areas for the development of senior staff in the near future. 'Lead and manage change' was most highly rated, with 57% including it in their most important areas for development. This was followed by 'Communicate and engage' and 'Manage and develop people', with 50% and 48% respectively.

Interestingly, if we include the fourth placed, 'Inspire direction and purpose', three of the top four priorities fall under the 'Workforce leadership' category in the LGNSW Local Government Capability Framework. The rest of the responses can be seen in Figure 9.

Figure 9. Future priorities for improving senior staff capability



When addressing the future needs of senior staff, our respondents told us that there are already significant shortcomings, particularly relating to emotional intelligence and people management skills. In general, senior staff exhibit technical aptitude. This, however, needs to be extended to those soft skills that have become more important in the contemporary workplace. A selection of responses for this section of the survey include:

Ensure there is a focus on modern people management practices and leadership, not just technical information

Senior staff needs a high level of emotional intelligence to navigate through the complex socio-political environment of local government

Local government, like many other industries, has a history of staff progressing through management levels based on technical skills, but lacking in people management skills. There needs to be more focus on personal attributes and people management skills rather than technical qualifications

Emotional intelligence and self-awareness are two areas senior leaders can benefit from exploring

3.7 Capability Framework – Successful Resources, Programs, Tools, Events & Learning Strategies

Personal Attributes

Individual coaching or mentoring with an external provider was most commonly cited as a successful learning strategy for senior managers to develop personal attributes capabilities. The next most common responses involved a range of self-assessment approaches, including 360-degree reviews¹⁷, followed by courses delivered by external providers and facilitators. Some respondents also suggested that these types of leadership traits cannot simply be learned but instead must be developed over the course of a person's life. A selection of responses for this section include:

Leading by example critically important, but not always achievable because one negative incident not quickly forgotten

Displaying resilience and adaptability, acting with integrity

Instil change management principles as part of the organisational culture, leading by example, showing empathy

In this area, many personal attributes are a result of previous studies, previous employment and the individual's own personality. I don't believe that these attributes can simply be learnt, they are inherent

This is more about experience and being in contact with people of high integrity

External leadership coaching following 360 degree feedback and action planning

Relationships

A repeated recommendation for the development of relationship skills is the need to develop communication skills. In addition to individual face-to-face coaching and mentoring, there was significant mention of workshopping and role-playing approaches to learning. A selection of responses for this section include:

¹⁷ Assessment tools specifically mentioned included Life Styles Inventory, Hogan Assessments and Myers-Briggs.

Including all senior staff in organisation wide training for consistency and transparency

Communication Communication Communication; it's not rocket science - delivering constructive criticism, addressing poor performance, Promoting the Organisation, communicating community responsibilities, dealing with active dissection, be clear, be consistent and always err on the side of walking somebody through the process rather than assuming they will get it eventually

Regular management meetings/workshops that incorporate soft skill development, knowledge and process instruction, problem solving and consultation. Practical coaching workshops to prepare for Skills and Performance Reviews.

Personal development training that provides the individual with real life experiences

Engaging external training providers; offsite strategic meetings; social get together

Difficult as often personal beliefs and perceptions of others vary also no unified view across management

Results

Although there were fewer responses to this section of the survey, and a lower level of consensus about ways to enhance results, collaboration and engagement were highlighted as essential factors. A selection of responses to this section include:

Use of the senior management appraisal process to highlight achievements and target results together with providing L&D opportunities to support

Creating Strategic Plans must have genuine engagement so that true ownership of the Plan allows tough decisions to take place – good leadership encourages those that identify the problems to bring the solution to the table – small organisations historically are creative and innovative, they don't work in silos and can actively engage across many areas

Regular management meetings/workshops that incorporate soft skill development, knowledge and process instruction, problem solving and consultation

Short, sharp, targeted face to face workshops; leadership coaching; mentoring by HR team; internal leadership workshops

Verbal and written encouragement and feedback. Financial benefits. Rewards like attending forums and conferences

Resources

The technical nature of this capability area was responded to in kind with suggestions mostly requiring post-graduate education, training from the Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD), UTS and the Institute of Public Works Engineering Australasia (IPWEA), and internal training by experts. A selection of responses to this section include:

In house training from finance staff as well as more detailed finance training for non-finance manager type courses

Geographic remoteness makes access and reliability to technology a challenge - managing performance in an intimate setting requires a highly developed skill set - marrying Community realism and expectation is an acquired art and should be an often and frequently visited benchmark – prioritising and rationalising assets requires diligent management and transparent communication

Internal procurement courses - generally this area not done well e.g. managing assets - and where is focus on safety and good governance and risk management???

Regular management meetings/workshops that incorporate soft skill development, knowledge and process instruction, problem solving and consultation.

In this area, it certainly is a matter of training, attendance at related forums, conferences and networking opportunities

AICD Company Directors Course, IPWEA Powers and Duties, IPWEA Contract Management, MBA

Engaging external training providers and utilising internal experts

Workforce Leadership

When responding to this question, our participants predominately suggested that leadership programs, post-graduate education, and networking with other senior managers and directors are effective resources for developing workforce leadership attributes. Key quotations for this section can be seen below:

We have developed a Monthly Operational Reporting and Planning Process across all areas, based on Operational Plan and Accountability achievement - a most valuable tool For Executive, Senior Managers, Staff and Councillors

In a small organisation, recently merged leadership is the greatest challenge. The family environment is both it's greatest asset and it's greatest challenge

Regular management meetings/workshops that incorporate soft skill development, knowledge and process instruction, problem solving and consultation

4 Stakeholder Interviews

Interviews were conducted with twenty individual representatives from councils in NSW, local government member organisations and educational providers. The councils serviced metropolitan, urban regional and rural locations, and respondents comprised general managers and senior directors, leadership and development staff, human resources staff and elected members.

The purpose of the interviews was to understand:

- > The significant challenges facing local government leaders today
- > The prime characteristics of good senior staff members
- > How open senior staff are to feedback and development, and the challenges involved in advancing leadership skills and behaviours at this level
- > What activities, training, or types of resources will best motivate and engage senior staff in their own learning and development

Thematic areas have been synthesised below according to interview responses. A selection of direct quotes has been included for each area.

4.1 The Context of Local Government – Balancing Governance, Politics, Finance, Competition & Community Expectations

It's difficult finding enough highly skilled people in the context of competing markets

90% of GMs are from local government. If they were recruited from the commercial sector, the result and impact could be different

The context of local government poses significant challenges for senior leaders. Our interviewees signalled a range of issues that affected their performance on a day-to-day basis. These included:

- > Local government finding its place in the hierarchy of government
- > Balancing governance and political aspirations
- > Securing funding to effectively maintain resources and services
- > Lack of cross-sectoral experience of senior staff
- > Adapting to workforce and demographic change
- > Emerging technological advancements, challenges and change
- > Increasing community expectations
- > Competing demands and information overload
- > Competition between councils
- > Engendering support from sector advocacy organisations
- > Lack of skilled candidates to fill senior positions

Interview responses suggested that at a local level councils find it challenging to keep up with evolving community demands. There is also a perceived lack of positive cooperative arrangements between neighbouring councils in some areas.

At a horizontal level, councils face competition for talented staff. The private sector and state government offer greater opportunities and remuneration and thus appear more attractive to top staff. Employees moving up the ranks of local government often do not have cross-sectoral

exposure, which can lead to insular and conservative mindsets dominating the senior level in local government.

Legislative pressures and political reforms pushed down from state and federal governments have been significant barriers to staff advancement and sustaining the everyday running of local government. State-wide reforms such as Fit For the Future, rate-pegging, and council amalgamations have required senior staff to integrate business units and have increased operational pressures, which has in turn impacted continuing development.

Many participants identified that although most senior staff are considered technically proficient, personal attributes such as communication and awareness are in need of development. Clearly, senior staff need to demonstrate a high standard of both skill sets in order to respond to the challenges facing leaders today such as navigating the hierarchy of government, funding, political and personal relationships, and communicating with audiences.

Dealing with large budget, GMs are essentially running a large corporation

To sustain the ongoing viability of business units, there is a need to step away from business-as-usual operations

Community expectations are higher than ever and are holding government to account. Information is more readily available on council performance, so people are more informed, but also lack understanding of the complexity of its operation – we need to manage these perceptions

Our interviewees also alluded to the comparative similarities in the operational environment of local governments and large businesses. A general manager or senior staff member needs to be well versed in all aspects of the business, from strategy and finance to operations and managing resources. Unique to those working in local government, however, are the challenges of understanding and responding to the needs of the community, dealing with regulatory pressures and building the appeal and reputation of local government councils as an employer of choice. This combination of challenges requires an innovative and adaptable mindset that can respond to the growing demands of working in local government.

Time was also a significant issue, repeated throughout our interviews. The need to balance competing demands compromised the effectiveness of senior staff members' work. Some of the suggestions addressing this limitation included:

- > Devolving responsibilities to less-senior staff
- > Unifying departments or collaborating to reduce intra-organisational friction
- > Embedding a culture of change and partnering with L&D to become partners in development and change

Our respondents also suggested that an open framework such as the Local Government Capability Framework could help communicate the responsibilities of senior staff, which in turn could initiate an extended conversation with councillors and mayors.

4.2 Contemporary Work Practices – Being Open to Change, Flexible & Adaptable

There are lots of senior staff working in local government who have had lifelong careers. They know 'nothing else' and are less open to change. They are less experienced in change and bring fewer alternative ways of doing things

Senior staff need to know how to deliver a narrative to an organisation about vision, direction and strategy. In many regional centres, the mindset is more 'small business' and not complex strategy or long term vision

People have their own vested interests at heart, we need to break away from this way of thinking. At the end of the day, it's the collective leadership that's going to make the organisation successful

The great majority of our interviewees responded that the pace of change experienced in the community has not been reflected in their organisation. Most of our interviewees also said that the insular nature of local government and the trend for general managers to be selected from within local government can foster a cycle of repetitive practices instead of innovation at a sectoral level. Considering the mounting challenges that local government faces, interviewees recommended the following changes:

- > Selecting senior staff that have a broader industry background
- > Changing organisational structures from being too hierarchical and insular to flatter and more horizontal ways of working
- > Identifying the true impact of social media that is being accelerated through technological advancement
- > Gaining a broader understanding of other sectors to understand the unique offering provided by local government
- > Increasing cooperation between elected members and professional staff so that both parties are working towards the same strategic outcome
- > Generating a pool of skilled people to recruit and nurture, and developing talent internally
- > Developing a growth-oriented organisational mindset that filters through to the rest of the organisation

These findings are further explored in the following higher-level observations.

Understanding and Responding to Societal Change

In the metropolitan context, an aging population and workforce, and exodus of stable leadership in a short period of time presents significant challenges

Many interviewees noted that the traditionally insular structure of local government is inadequate or unable to respond to changes characterising the community and social life at large, as well as broader sectoral and organisational challenges. This is partly due to recruitment practices where a large proportion of general managers are hired from within local government. Although this has many advantages (among them, the new recruit already understands council workflow and past needs), new ways of hiring would introduce new skills, mindsets and ways of working. Some of the challenges facing the local government sector when it comes to attracting new senior talent includes:

- > Lack of appeal of local government in relation to other sectors
- > Low pay relative to other industries
- > Greater demand on workers relative to other industries
- > Being out of touch with millennials and younger community members

Agile Working

Senior staff need to be open to flatter hierarchies, and cross-functional teams

We are operating in a highly regulated environment. Senior staff need to be confident in terms of trying new things and bring innovation into the sector

GMs need to manage relationships and assets in all three areas of strategy, planning and community

Regulation, organisational hierarchy and the siloed structure of councils are seen as barriers to innovation and agile ways of working across many roles, from general manager to directors, line managers and below. This can also result in a lack of cohesion between organisations' strategic, community, engineering and HR functions.

Role-modelling Behaviours

Senior leaders need to model the behaviour to embed the learning

Good leaders set the tone for the rest of the organisation

General managers and senior staff are seen as role models in their organisation. As well as planning and communicating the organisation's strategic direction, they must also demonstrate productive and progressive behaviours. In addition to operational responsibilities, they must also model leadership, including being aware of their L&D needs, both in terms of learning new skills to augment their existing capabilities and to support the development of their staff.

4.3 Leadership Qualities – Communication, Resilience, Integrity, Collaboration & Risk-Taking

The natural demographic of senior staff is generally competitive and, intellectually intelligent, so how do they fit in the time for self-reflection?

A senior staff member understands compromise and uses persuasive leadership. They see leadership as a relationship, not as a textbook of skills

Self-awareness is such an important aspect of a senior leader, particularly in diverse council environments. The key is to be open to feedback, and actively seek feedback

Senior staff in local government face significant challenges when they are appointed: they are expected to hit the ground running and demonstrate the capacity to lead across the business. The changing context of working in local government, including societal, technical and sectoral innovations, requires advanced competencies across the business to adequately move

conversations forward and act as a partner in creating change. In addressing the leadership abilities required of senior staff, repeated responses from our interviewees included:

- > Self-awareness of abilities and deficiencies, and the drive to self-improve
- > Growing and enhancing the culture of the organisation
- > Articulating the organisational vision
- > Tempering expectations in their community and elected partners
- > Influencing the political body to assist in shaping the organisational vision
- > Being a public authority (especially in regional and rural councils)
- > Displaying and promoting continuous improvement – personally and within the organisation –and modelling expected behaviours
- > Communicating clearly to engage and influence
- > Embracing risk and change
- > Displaying a growth mindset when mentoring staff and building organisational capacity
- > Emotional intelligence in response to the politicised nature of the position
- > Willing to ‘let go of the doing’ and to take responsibility for the leading
- > Taking opportunities to network with senior staff in other organisations to learn what can be applied in their own organisation

Communicating and Collaborating Within the Organisation and with Elected Members and the Community

Senior staff need to be collaborative and interested in building relationships. They need to have the capacity to delegate, trust and enable their staff

Senior staff need to communicate to staff about what the political body prioritises and high level strategic direction

Senior staff need to communicate clearly, and engage and influence – these are critical characteristics

According to our interviewees, communicating and collaborating are two of the most significant qualities required of senior staff. They are expected to mediate relationships with elected members, engage with the community and support understanding and awareness of the council’s strategic vision.

Demonstrating Vision and Building the Organisation

Senior staff need to be willing to let go of the doing, and take responsibility for the leading

Leaders find it difficult to communicate vision. I’ve only seen very few people that are able to articulate where the organisation is heading. It is difficult to articulate, and to translate strategy to something tangible

Combined with communicating and collaborating, the ability to demonstrate and lead a strategic organisational vision is paramount for successful senior staff in local government. This also involves translating the organisational vision to all levels of staff. Some of the other key qualities raised by our interviewees include:

- > Engagement and strategic focus
- > Displaying and developing technical skills (financial reporting, infrastructural management)
- > Displaying and developing personal attributes (resilience, integrity)
- > Management and tolerance of risk
- > Self-awareness
- > Promoting L&D

4.4 Learning strategies – Face-to-face Training, Mentoring & Coaching

Joint organisations provide opportunities to lift leadership capability in regional areas

One of the biggest problems we have with leadership development is that people have been here a while and are talking to the same people, not being challenged by different perspectives. A number of managers want to have more external exposure and want to be exposed to leaders from other councils/sectors in learning opportunities for real-life challenges

We are keen to have different ways of L&D that challenge skills and do more strategic learning with different perspectives – work on real-time challenges

Courses developed for senior leaders that are metro based often don't really work for regional leaders

A mix of people is very important – hearing about a wide range of problems and solutions. It keeps things at a high level

Our interviewees generally identified a lack of adequate resources that respond to the needs of senior staff in local government. Consistent with the survey results, the most popular suggestions included mentoring, coaching and 360-degree feedback. Second to these forms of learning were professional and executive courses.¹⁸

Ideas to help support the engagement of senior staff in their own development included:

- > Peer learning
- > Structured personal learning (individualised programs)
- > Council-wide development sessions incorporating proprietary training services
- > Access to self-assessment tools, to be shared between elected members and senior staff
- > Reverse mentoring
- > Secondments
- > Conferences and external engagement opportunities
- > Professional development activities that could be integrated into 12-month planning and budgetary cycles

¹⁸ Courses specifically mentioned include The Australian Institute of Company Director's five-day course, the UTS Institute for Public Policy and Governance's Master of Local Government, courses run by Australia and New Zealand School of Government and Australian Institute of Management and Master of Business Administration programs.

Some of the impediments for senior staff eager to engage in their own development included:

- > Lack of support from the CEO or general manager
- > Difficulty finding learning and development suppliers and services
- > Lack of professional development courses relevant to senior staff in regional areas

Also of note was that the most common reason for senior staff members' poor uptake of professional development was the lack of incentive relative to their position in the organisation. From our interviews, it was generally perceived that general managers who are nearing retirement and have reached the top of the ladder do not undertake professional development activities to advance their abilities. It was noted in our interviews that the NSW Local Government Act (LG Act) falls behind the Qld LG Act, which legislates in section (13)(3) that:

The chief executive officer has the following extra responsibilities—

(a) managing the local government in a way that promotes—

- (i) the effective, efficient and economical management of public resources; and*
- (ii) excellence in service delivery; and*
- (iii) continual improvement;*

It was suggested that the peak body for local government in NSW, LGNSW, as well as the Office for Local Government (OLG), should investigate the potential to update the LG Act to make provisions for the statutory requirement of all local government staff to pursue continuous improvement.

The NSW LG Act states it is statutory for councillors and elected members to pursue learning and development, but not for senior staff

I'm not sure how you'd enforce learning. It could be built in as statutory by a standard contract through OLG. That would be a reasonable mandate given that the community would expect professional staff to be in processes of continual improvement

4.5 Local Government Capability Framework – Recruitment, Self-Assessment & Mediation with Mayors/Councillors

Common systems (e.g. capability frameworks) aren't reflective of the difference in work between rural and metro roles

There is a lack of industry consistency – the capability framework makes it easier for councils across the board to implement (professional development)

Councillors have a self-assessment tool – senior staff cannot access it and would really like to so they can help councillors build skills and capabilities

The development of our leadership capability framework revealed that the management skills that were really required are finance, resource management, increasing digital abilities

The capability framework is a great way to start conversations between GMs, senior staff, L&D staff and councillors

We are using the framework to guide the GM recruitment process

I'm a big fan of the capability framework. We should be engaging with it as an industry and get consistency on our expectations of staff

It should be a learning tool as opposed to a performance-review tool – sometimes it is hard to distinguish between the two

The majority of interviewees suggested that the Local Government Capability Framework could have many uses in the recruitment and assessment of senior staff and communicating staff roles. In particular, it would be helpful to have a concrete resource that could stand as an across-the-board benchmark and assist with developing position descriptions and self-assessment, and offer a way of quantifying the performance of senior staff to elected members. Our respondents indicated that it would need to be born out of the industry and be informed by how local government works and where it is going.

Some additional general thoughts around the utility of the framework included:

- > The Local Government Capability Framework allows for consistency of evaluation and expectations of staff for performance appraisal
- > It needs to comply with the industry award and the LG Act
- > It could be linked to, or aligned with, the online Public Sector Capability framework
- > It could act as an e-learning supplement to face-to-face learning
- > It could be considered more holistically with greater relevance to the broader business
- > It could be housed and updated by a university
- > It needs buy-in from the mayor and there could be a section that mentions elected members for reciprocal understanding
- > The capability framework needs to emphasise community engagement and make explicit reference to councillors/the governing body

5 Extended Findings/Considerations

There are overlapping themes in the initial desktop research, survey results and insights from interviews. At the senior staff level, current successful training strategies form around face-to-face coaching and mentoring augmented by 360-degree feedback. This approach, however, requires buy-in from senior staff and general managers to integrate learning and development into the organisation, preferably modelled on the behaviour of senior staff.

The business operations of local government councils share many of the same traits of other public and private organisations. They deal with significant infrastructural assets, large operational budgets, and multiple lines within their organisation. In addition, they are also required to communicate their vision with the community, a task that differs in complexity according to the location and context of different councils. Given these requirements, respondents see benefit from increased and/or mandated professional-development for senior staff to better equip leaders to respond to the needs of their community in the face of societal change and contextual challenges.

5.1 Requirement for Resources Specific to Senior Staff in the Local Government Sector

Resources need to be relevant and relatable to local government professionals

Many resources are very broad, or not specific to the environment we work in

Working with the relevant Industrial and Professional bodies to tailor professional development of staff

There is a lack of consistency in the industry – especially in implementing leadership development

Although there are courses and programs available for senior staff, it is clear that third-party courses and programs need to be better tailored to those leading in local government. This is particularly urgent for councils in regional and rural areas, which encounter different issues to those faced by metropolitan councils.

Our respondents suggested the sector work with providers to develop tailored approaches to the professional development needs of senior staff in local government. This approach would increase consistency across the board and yield greater value by being strategically targeted to the needs of leading in local government.

5.2 Bringing Together Partner Councils

Connecting Councils together, e.g. intra-council leadership forums, leadership networks, and leadership coaching

A structured secondment program would be helpful – with the ability to move staff between participating councils for 3-4 months at a time

Some responses suggested that regional organisations of councils (ROCs) could help gather support for allied councils and communicate their learning and development needs. Although this strategy may be more important for regional and rural councils, it may also assist metropolitan councils that face the same or similar problems on a daily basis. Partnership between councils could be furthered through secondments to encourage greater perspective of the challenges facing local government and give secondees the opportunity to implement innovative solutions to their councils' distinct and common issues.

5.3 Strengthening Relationships Between the Executive Arms of Local Government

The 2 executive bodies – councillors and senior staff – each have specific roles and responsibilities that clash

There needs to be a balance of governance responsibilities and political aspirations. There are issues around the quality of councillors that are accountable to a democratically elected body

It helps to get buy-in from the Mayor

The Capability Framework can help the Mayor understand the roles of senior staff, with the facilitation of an independent external person

A lack of clear communication and cooperation between elected members and senior staff is seen as a significant hindrance to the daily operation of councils. Given the different professional backgrounds of both groups of staff, communicating the variances of responsibility and abilities could reduce friction and increase collaboration.

Our respondents have suggested that building understanding and creating opportunities for discussion around the 'highly advanced behaviours' descriptors for senior staff (as described in the Local Government Capability Framework) could enable greater transparency of responsibilities and benefit the relationship between the executive arms of local government.

5.4 Local Government Act

Professional development is not mandatory, or statutory. There needs to be a legislative requirement. NSW is behind QLD, with a requirement in the LG Act, and VIC, where it is currently up for debate in the upper house

The lack of a statutory requirement for the continuing development of senior staff was generally seen to be a hindrance. Interviewees noted that in states where ongoing training was made statutory, as in Qld, it was easier to encourage support for staff development. Although operating environments vary between states, a common training benchmark could encourage greater participation in self-development offerings among senior staff. Statutory changes to the NSW LG Act is another possibility.

5.5 Balancing the Development of Technical Skills & Personal Attributes

Should be much greater focus on governance and risk management, and safety and asset management

Emotional Intelligence and Self Awareness are two areas senior leaders could benefit from exploring

Responses from the survey and interviews suggested that senior staff required more training to develop their interpersonal skills. It was also suggested that senior staff required specialised technical skills to assist them in making various day-to-day decisions that relate to finance, assets and infrastructure. This finding indicates the need for senior staff to be all-rounders, i.e. they must be highly proficient in both technical and communication skills and have the self-awareness to seek out resources to support their developmental needs.

5.6 An Online Resource for Senior Staff Development Options

Have to have a mature organisation for 360 [degree feedback] to be successful with high degree of trust and capacity for self-reflection

This would require an education piece for mayors as at the end of the day they are politicians not managers. Strongly advise having someone external to manage the process

Senior staff in local government are a difficult bunch to develop in general! But we really need high quality leadership in this industry

If someone isn't working collaboratively, they are unlikely to be thinking about doing a course – the online resource needs to help people to understand what their developmental needs are. Perhaps it is better if the leadership team use it together

We best learn through chatting to others

Senior staff are keen to have different ways of L&D that focus on strategic learning, different perspectives and opportunities to work on real time challenges

All staff should consider their council as the training ground for themselves and others

The trouble with performance management is that it's been so poorly done in the industry

This resource needs to be aligned with performance appraisal / standard contract to engage senior staff to use it

Self reflection is a good starting point for anybody, be it GMs, senior directors, managers, councillors, rest of staff

This resource could act as my "online mentor"

The research process included creating an initial suite of development options that correspond with the 'highly advanced' behaviours outlined in the Local Government Capability Framework. Development options include a mix of on-the-job activities, learning from peers and formal training, as per the 70-20-10 model of L&D.

The options have been adapted from the NSW Public Service Commission's Capability Discovery Tool¹⁹ and tailored to senior staff in local government, drawing on a combination of advice and input from council staff, sector stakeholders and existing resources from UTS IPPG.

These development options are provided as an open resource that senior staff can access online at <http://ssdevelop.lgnsw.org.au> and utilise for their own L&D purposes. The tool could also be utilised by local government L&D professionals to assist with identifying the training needs of senior staff. Another potential use of the resource is for staff appraisals; it could be

¹⁹ <https://www.psc.nsw.gov.au/workforce-management/capability-framework/capability-framework-resources-index/capability-discovery-tool>, Accessed October 2018

used by general managers to assess senior staff and by mayors when discussing performance and development opportunities in the general manager appraisal process

The research revealed widespread support for this resource. The following ideas and comments gathered from the interviews could help shape further refinements and applications.

The Resource Tool

- > An online resource of this nature requires a central body to take carriage of it in terms of managing and updating the content to ensure its applicability and relevance. Ideas for this body include a steering group from across the sector, a university centre such as UTS IPPG, or the LGWDRF workforce group.
- > The resource could include ideas to stimulate development methods that move away from traditional learning environments and towards more blended learning. Ideas for this include reflecting on real-time work challenges, peer sharing and networking, asking “why” questions, and offering 15-minute online learning videos.
- > The resource is widely supported although it is acknowledged that the content may overlap with similar offers from current training providers.

Assessment Options

- > Include a self-assessment option linked to the Local Government Capability Framework so that senior staff can rate their own ability across the capability areas and identify key priority areas for personal development.
- > Provide a way for senior staff members to see how they rate in comparison to their peers’ self-assessment results (it is acknowledged that this needs to be implemented within a culture of trust and learning).
- > Include an option for others to provide assessment, such as a 360-degree feedback tool, to help the individual better understand their strengths and areas for improvement.
- > Educate people not to be fearful of assessment processes. Assessment components should be promoted as being a tool to aid development, not to highlight poor performance.

Links to Performance and Appraisal

- > Linking the tool to a standardised performance development plan or salary increase could provide an incentive for senior staff to regularly engage with it.
- > Performance conversations should be example driven so that the individual articulates how they have undertaken development in the 70-20-10 areas.
- > Its usefulness within the general manager appraisal process entirely depends on the calibre of the mayor. The process would need to be overseen by an independent party to ensure consistency and a focus on outcomes.
- > Aligning it to a personalised development plan would ensure that individuals are accountable for their own learning and engagement with the resource.

Links to Other Online Systems

- > It was generally agreed that the online tool would need to operate as a stand-alone resource as it would be difficult to integrate it with other systems. The effectiveness of this tool depends on easy access and useability.
- > An online database or catalogue that is regularly updated and that collates the latest thinking, research and articles on topics of interest to local government would be useful for the sector.

Engagement with the Resource

- > The resource should be driven by each council’s L&D team so it can be adapted and tailored to the organisation’s needs with messaging that will engage staff in its use.
- > The resource should be extended to include other levels in the organisation, not just senior staff, so it becomes part of a whole-of-organisation approach to learning and capability building.

6 Conclusion

This research project recognises that the development of senior staff is needed to maintain a credible and sustainable local government sector that retains and attracts high-calibre leaders who can respond to the needs of their community. Senior staff need to be able to balance technical skills with interpersonal and intra-personal ones. They need to be all-rounders and have the self-awareness to understand their own areas of weakness and to seek out resources to support self-development.

Key findings from the research reveal that a one-size-fits-all approach is not suited to developing the abilities of senior staff in local government. In part, this is due to the unique context local government leaders work within, with variances in political relationships, local and environmental responsibilities, regional conditions, legislative cycles and mandates.

However, it is recognised that a combined approach of assessment and development methods tailored to local government and individual councils is an effective way to address the needs of senior staff. This includes self-reflection, 360-degree feedback and blended L&D options such as peer learning, 1:1 and executive-team coaching, real-time work challenges and learning stimuli delivered online or face to face.

Being able to integrate learnings into council organisations is seen as the key to engaging individuals in their own development and to ensuring the effectiveness of the learning. The lack of a statutory requirement to maintain professional development means that senior staff working in local government do not have a benchmark to work towards. This warrants further exploration into either a baseline qualification, self-driven learning or a continuing professional development points scheme that would encourage self-awareness of development needs.

Relationships and collaborations across the sector strengthen senior staff members' engagement with L&D opportunities. These include partnerships with other councils, better collaboration between local government associations and providers, and stronger relationships between the governing and professional arms of council organisations.

These research findings have been prepared in conjunction with an online resource aligned with the Local Government Capability Framework for the use of senior staff working in local government. A webpage for the online resource can be accessed at <http://ssdevelop.lgnsw.org.au> and includes a mix of on-the-job reflection activities, ideas for social learning through interactions and formal training options as per the 70-20-10 model of L&D.

While this research focuses on NSW local government, the findings and the online resource are applicable to the development of senior staff in local government beyond NSW. The work provides important insights into how to best support the learning of those in leadership roles that are critical to the success of local governments delivering on strategic outcomes to citizens and communities.

7 References

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