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Distributed leadership: Building capacity to maximise collaborative practice in a new teaching research aged care service

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Chapter 5: Presentation and discussion of the research findings

This final chapter presents and discusses the four findings from this research study, which together answer the major research question: How can distributed leadership be incorporated within a new operational model for ViTA South as a driver to maximise sustained collaborative practice in service delivery? Conclusions and implications for future research are then discussed. The thesis concludes with a further fictional scenario involving ‘Molly’ which is presented to demonstrate how distributed leadership in practice can contribute to a positive resident experience.

The major research question was answered as a result of a deliberate and systematic process of action research which involved logic modelling. This systematic approach facilitated sensemaking required to answer the research question. The sensemaking process revealed that no one strategy or approach can create the conditions for staff to exercise distributed leadership, but there are factors to consider in creating those conditions. The key concepts from each of the findings are drawn together into the design of a framework, presented as a final finding, which other organisations may use – if their context is similar to ViTA South’s context – to guide the design of their own tailored organisational development to translate the concept of distributed leadership into practice in their organisation.

5.1 First finding – A disciplined, systematic and deliberate approach

The first finding is that a disciplined, systematic, and deliberate approach, sustained over time can generate internalisation of the practices of distributed leadership. For ViTA South the organisational development action research approach, utilising frameworks that define expectations of distributed leadership skills (e.g., Health LEADS Australia) contributed to improving distributed leadership capacity.

5.1.1 The importance of the diagnosis and design approach

The systematic approach identified through this research, and adopted by the ViTA South formal leadership team, shares similarities with the ‘diagnosis and design’ process recommended by Spillane and Coldren (2011). This process involved scoping
barriers to distributed leadership which then informed systems design by allowing for the tailoring of strategies to overcome the identified barriers.

An example presented in Chapter 4 demonstrates this ongoing process in action. During the diagnosis process at ViTA South it was identified that a perceived barrier related to heavy workload. As part of the exploration undertaken within the diagnosis process to assess the potential impacts of this barrier it was suggested that in a busy environment such as ViTA South, there was little time for engaging staff to develop systems and processes which guide how they work. Data from the site manager interviews showed that formal leaders would often take it upon themselves to design systems and processes in isolation from the broader team. The new systems would require staff to operate within these systems despite the staff having limited input or contribution into the design of those systems.

The diagnosis process led to a new design process which involved identifying a proposed solution to be tested to overcome the identified barrier. In this example the solution designed for ViTA South was to establish a range of ongoing forums which facilitated staff engagement in helping shape the systems they were expected to work within. These forums were factored into workload allocation and were designed to be embedded within role descriptions. One such forum was the ViTA South Action Learning Groups. Key outcomes from these action learning groups were that they:

a. advanced the opportunity for the ViTA South workforce to engage with others in systems design to enable achievement of organisational goals, and
b. created an emerging community of 'change agents' within the ViTA South workforce who do not accept the status quo but rather look for opportunities to improve and drive innovation and have the forum and permission to lead change.

Furthermore, it was diagnosed that ACH Group strategic goals and operational models were detached from day to day practice. There were limited connections or measurements of how day to day practice was contributing to achieving the strategic
goals. These goals and models were developed and maintained by managers and documented in a place only they could access.

Once again, the diagnosis process led to a design process which involved identifying a proposed solution to be tested to overcome the identified barrier. In this example the solution designed for ViTA South was to develop an accessible operational model. The operational model linked strategic goals to day to day practices and was presented in the form of logic models. This has contributed to the following evidenced outcomes from the action learning groups which were highlighted in Chapter 4. The action learning groups:

a. Provided a framework for the ViTA South workforce that they could engage with to gain an insight and understanding of strategic goals and understand how their day to day work contributes to overall strategic goals.
b. Advanced the capacity of the ViTA South workforce to engage in systems design and improvement by making the systems they are working in explicit rather than implicit.
c. Reduced risk of systems being person dependent and affected by staff turnover.
d. Provided a mechanism to develop and drive innovation.

The deliberate and systematic diagnosis and design process was a critical approach to support the operationalisation of distributed leadership as a means of maximising sustained collaborative practice. It identified the existing workplace structures and processes within ViTA South that needed to be changed. The diagnosis and design approach also informed the ongoing changes to workplace structures required for staff to exercise distributed leadership at ViTA South. Mintzberg and Westley (1992) advocate that this type of approach is an appropriate way to manage change. They suggest letting it happen and then to acknowledge and address the challenges it creates along the way, through applying a diagnosis and design mindset. The diagnosis and design process was established at ViTA South to develop distributed leadership as a social process to lead change rather than depending on the actions of an individual to drive change.
Whereas diagnosis is critical to how problems are defined, prognosis is critical for how solutions to these problems are articulated. Together they are the basis for design work, or realising those solutions in practice (Spillane & Coldren, 2011). The deliberate and systematic process of logic modelling operationalised this concept and contributed to developing and enhancing shared understandings. The logic model format helped in communicating the underlying assumptions associated with planned action.

### 5.1.2 The power of logic modelling

The application of logic modelling served a dual purpose within the organisational development approach adopted for *ViTA South*. Initially logic modelling was adopted as a process to facilitate the development of shared understandings amongst the *ViTA South* formal leadership team. This was to develop shared understandings associated with the strategies being developed for distributed leadership at *ViTA South*.

The logic modelling process has been documented and presented as a series of visual logic models. These logic models were incorporated into the discussion of the three action research cycles outlined in Chapter 4. The inclusion of visual logic models has also been used to provide a frame of reference for the reader. The logic models present underlying thinking associated with the theory of action behind strategies chosen and subsequently developed for *ViTA South*.

The use of logic modelling has provided an approach suitable for the complex adaptive system of *ViTA South*. It has not only contributed to the identification of strategies to be tested at *ViTA South* but has also provided the underpinning explanation associated with the dynamics of how the *ViTA South Formal Leadership Team* expected the proposed solutions to work in practice.

In understanding complex adaptive systems it is recognised that attention needs to be drawn to action within an organisation (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Similarly, a realist perspective seeks to investigate and think about particular mechanisms associated with theories of action within the context (Pawson, 2013). Applying this understanding to the organisational development undertaken for *ViTA South* participants in the research
recognised the need to avoid a prescriptive approach involving checklists or specific instructions for change. This required a shift in thinking from having a task focus to having a broader focus on the action and consequences of the action on the broader complex adaptive system. Logic modelling operationalised both concepts.

Individuals from organisations whose context is similar to that of ViTA South are encouraged to adopt logic modelling within their organisational development design process. This research has found that logic modelling not only documents strategies, but also outlines how these strategies will contribute to distributed leadership.

Logic modelling may also be applied to future comparative research studies, designed to examine different organisational development approaches toward creating distributed leadership opportunities. However, it is recognised that context specific comparisons of the outcomes in different contexts may not be possible. This research has also found value in understanding the theory of action behind organisational development aimed at creating the conditions for staff to exercise distributed leadership.

5.1.3 The value of action research to create a culture of change

This research utilised action research as a mechanism to translate the theory that is written about distributed leadership into useable strategies. The action research process enabled collective problem solving which was deemed necessary to create a culture of change and innovation to achieve outcomes (Fullan, 2001; Senge, 1999). According to Fullan (2001), leading in a culture of change means creating a culture of change, not just developing a structure of change.

The role of the ViTA South formal leadership team in supporting the creation of a culture of change and innovation to support distributed leadership involved creating an exciting vision, which engaged and motivated staff. This involved inspiring and role modelling a leadership approach to question and recognise where change is required. It also canvassed possibilities which supported fresh thinking, taking risks and facilitated collaboration for improvement.
Fullan (2001) recommends that to build innovation into the culture of an organisation requires developing collective capacity and commitment to solving complex problems. The action research approach enabled a distributed leadership approach to link the vision with operational processes within the logic models developed within the ViTA South operational model. Collective capacity to solving complex problems was enabled through action learning groups which provided a forum for staff to contribute to and influence the evolution of ViTA South toward achieving the vision. The diagnosis and design approach provided opportunities and encouraged all staff to influence and participate in the change process.

Creating a culture of innovation does not mean adopting one innovation after another (Fullan, 2001). Creating distributed leadership opportunities has involved developing an organisational capacity at ViTA South to seek, critically assess, and selectively incorporate innovation involving new ideas and practices as part of systems improvement. It influences informal discussion on issues, encourages diverse voices and consumer involvement and advocates for better outcomes (Health Workforce Australia, 2012a).

To support system change complex systems theory notes that leaders must create the conditions for the emergence of such change – in particular, by encouraging the cycles of action, feedback and learning that empower system actors to think and work differently (Ramalingan, Jones, Reba, & Young, 2008). These systematic and deliberate processes facilitated sensemaking required to understand how distributed leadership could be incorporated within a new operational model for ViTA South as a driver to maximise sustained collaborative practice in service delivery.
5.2 Second finding – Importance of sensemaking

The second finding was that there was a much larger gap between existing practices of leadership in ViTA South and the expectations of distributed leadership than originally anticipated. The primary reason for this gap appears to be the need for personal behaviour change, which does not happen without ‘sensemaking’ capability that ultimately translates, over time, if reinforced, into desired behaviour change. In this research, behaviour change has been led through applying the diagnosis and design mindset associated with sensemaking.

Analysis of the interview data and action research cycle data demonstrates that distributed leadership is a complex concept to define, let alone apply, in practice. The literature review found that much of the research on the topic tends to be conceptual and fails to adequately provide practical guidance on how to apply distributed leadership in a practical setting. There is much written about distributed leadership as outlined in the literature review, but as a practitioner it can be overwhelming and difficult to attempt to navigate and utilise in practice. The existing research literature focuses on the concept and its potential but does not inform organisational development required to develop it in practice.

Ongoing sensemaking was key to identifying how distributed leadership could be incorporated within the new operational model for ViTA South, as a driver to maximise sustained collaborative practice in service delivery. There was no known model or framework that could be drawn on. The application of distributed leadership in practice was identified as a problem requiring a local contextual solution for ViTA South. Therefore in understanding how this was to be undertaken the researcher, in conjunction with the members of the ViTA South formal leadership team, needed to make sense of the existing research literature, make sense of existing cognitive frameworks which existed which needed to change, and define what they were trying to achieve.

The process of sensemaking recognises how an individual’s previous experience informs future actions (Weick, 1995). In the context of policy implementation research,
sociological theories of sensemaking contend that local interpretation shapes the direction of policy implementation. It suggests that staff at ViTA South would construct their own interpretation of distributed leadership by interpreting it through the lens of their pre-existing assumptions and historical practices. How they construct such understandings shapes their decisions and actions as they practice distributed leadership.

Sensemaking theorists suggest that action is created as a result of how people notice or interpret information from the environment, then make meaning of that information. They then act on these interpretations, which influences the development of culture and associated social structure and routines over time (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

From the site manager interviews it was evident that distributed leadership would not normally happen organically. A manager who aspires to create distributed leadership really needs to understand what distributed leadership means and confirm they are applying a sociological perspective when designing their leadership strategy. ViTA South staff worked together to construct their understanding of distributed leadership. They used ASERT, 6E and Health LEADS as sensemaking tools to create cognitive frameworks to inform the development of new thinking and meaning to encourage distributed leadership. The tools that the ViTA South formal leadership team found most useful to help guide the development of the program theory articulated in the program logic models were the ASERT and the 6E Conceptual model. These tools, together with adopting a sociological perspective help, explain what a distributed leadership perspective of leadership means in practice.

Also in applying a sociological perspective, sensemaking fits well in developing distributed leadership as sensemaking is recognised as not being an individual process (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Thomas, Sussman, & Henderson, 2001; Weick, 1995). It shares similarities to distributed leadership and collaborative practice which are recognised as social processes (Jones, 2014; Spillane, 2012; Youngs, 2009). Therefore of paramount importance has been the sensemaking process to recognise the ways in
which existing structures impact on the social process associated with distributed leadership.

Action research has been used at ViTA South as a social process to facilitate the sensemaking process required to create the conditions for staff to exercise distributed leadership. The design of action research has enabled a social approach to learning and development which has informed the design of organisational development. This interaction involved sensemaking by the ViTA South formal leadership team in interpreting the evidence gathered throughout the action research process. Then sensemaking again enabled the translation of evidence into the design of logic models which were then used to guide organisational development.

Consequently, and based on this study, it appears that groups need to identify their own sensemaking tools to be able to interpret and shape their thinking around distributed leadership as it applies to their own practical setting. This research does not endorse ASERT or 6E or Health LEADS Australia as the only sensemaking tools but rather that these were found to be of relevance to the setting of ViTA South. However practitioners may undertake a review process which includes ASERT and 6E to determine sensemaking tools which are appropriate for their own setting or they may choose or design their own sensemaking tools.

5.2.1 Understanding sensemaking as it applies to behaviour change

Within this research sensemaking has been applied as an interpretative concept for developing ‘understanding’. Sensemaking was shown to provide an interpretive framework to understand the underlying assumptions which staff draw on to inform thinking and subsequent actions (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). A construct within sensemaking utilised by this research is the notion of sensegiving. Sensegiving is the process of attempting to facilitate the reconstruction and development of meaning of reality toward a redefinition of organisational reality (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). This interpretive concept was used within this research to contribute to a deeper understanding of the underlying thinking and assumptions which influenced the choice of
strategies chosen for ViTA South. These strategies were then reflected in the logic models.

The evidence from the site manager interviews showed that it was unlikely that distributed leadership would happen organically. Despite the fact that the site managers intuitively understood distributed leadership no known organisational development approaches yet existed to help guide distributed leadership development – from a behavioural perspective – for ViTA South.

The members of the ViTA South formal leadership were not able to draw on any previous experience working within models of distributed leadership to inform future actions required to enact distributed leadership. Earlier it was stated that a sociological perspective was adopted within the sensemaking process at ViTA South. The researcher’s thinking recognised collaborative practice as a social process. The researcher recognises traditional leadership as promoting processes and systems which are individualistic in nature. The resulting individualistic focused systems conflict with and do not promote the social process of collaborative practice. Therefore a sensemaking process involving sensebreaking was necessary to unpack underlying thinking and assumptions gained from working in hierarchical models of leadership. This process involved re-conceptualising new assumptions based on the concept of distributed leadership to guide the development of their future actions. In applying a sociological perspective an identified synergy is apparent between distributed leadership and collaborative practice as they both act to promote collective behaviour.

While distributed leadership is regarded as important in health and social care, particularly when change and improvement are required, the earlier literature review showed that there have been few studies exploring how distributed leadership is enacted in the practical setting (Currie & Lockett, 2011; Lemieux-Charles & McGuire, 2006; San Martín-Rodríguez et al., 2005). This study helps to bring depth and substance to the challenges of transitioning from traditional leadership models to distributed ones, and helps in understanding why that transition is likely to be a difficult one.
5.2.2 Tools used within sensemaking for ViTA South

There were three key tools identified and adopted to guide sensemaking throughout the organisational development process undertaken for ViTA South. These three sensegiving tools are:

1. Health LEADS Australia, the Australian Health Leadership framework.
3. 6E Conceptual Framework.

The capabilities and descriptors outlined within Health LEADS Australia proved useful as a part of the ViTA South organisational development process. The framework was used by the ViTA South leadership team to shape thinking about the capabilities needed to be developed to enact distributed leadership. These capabilities were factored into the organisational development for distributed leadership. Evidence from the ViTA South formal leadership interviews (presented in Chapter 4) confirmed that ViTA South leadership team found that this was useful in shaping shared understandings. It provided staff with a reference that they could understand and relate to and as such it provided a common language.

The leadership development undertaken at ViTA South aimed to create leaders who had the ability to self-reflect and improve, engage others and communicate a vision enabling decisions to align with organisational goals. It was identified that to achieve these goals required embracing and driving innovation and aligning complex systems at ViTA South.

The ASERT proved useful as another sensegiving tool to guide and shape thinking required to develop strategies for staff to exercise distributed leadership in practice for ViTA South. It was used within a process of diagnosis and design discussed earlier. The ASERT directly contributed to the development of tailored organisational specific sensegiving tools which were required to develop shared understandings. This included the development of a documented leadership governance structure which integrated the concept of distributed leadership. This governance structure translated the nebulous concept of distributed leadership into something concrete for ViTA South. This
helped contribute to developing a shared understanding of what is meant by distributed leadership and how it complements formal leadership structures as well as guides organisational development.

Together the ASERT framework, the 6E Conceptual Framework and Health LEADS Australia Framework provided ‘on the ground’ diagnostic tools which could identify potential barriers which impact on the ability of staff to exercise distributed leadership associated with hierarchical leadership structures. A design process developed solutions to address the identified barriers and create the conditions for staff to exercise distributed leadership. This ongoing, iterative diagnosis and design process outlined in Chapter 4 and discussed earlier in this chapter underpinned the organisational development approach for ViTA South.

5.3 Third finding – no one strategy or approach will create the conditions needed to close the gap between the concepts of distributed leadership and its practice

The third finding is that no one strategy or approach will create the conditions needed to close the gap between the concepts of distributed leadership and how they were enacted in practice in ViTA South. An array of theoretical constructs and actions is required. In particular, such strategies or approaches which embrace a long term vision of change and embrace the following factors or conditions are needed.

Firstly, a clear governance structure completed by executive and board buy in and support is needed. This factor, together with a reference point created by an operational model which all staff at ViTA South could refer to was an important condition. Sustained change of this type requires time and needs to be done in ‘baby-steps’.

Secondly, a dedicated change agent is required to keep the focus of developing distributed leadership on an ongoing basis. In the case of this research this change agent role was take on by the Interprofessional Learning Coordinator.
Thirdly, strategies must emphasise the leadership of a group as collective action, as opposed to focusing on the leadership traits of individuals. This factor is particularly relevant when considering leadership development training requirements. The choice made for ViTA South was to include coaching and mentoring within leadership training as part of the running of the ViTA South formal leadership team meetings. This choice anticipated that the role of leaders as coaches would help people develop and invest in their capacity to be effective leaders (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2001).

Fourthly, it was found that the action learning groups provided an opportunity for leadership development to incorporate the concept of distributed leadership. This approach involved experiential learning gained through staff participating in action learning groups.

The factors and conditions above need to be considered when developing strategies to create the conditions in any organisation moving to a distributed leadership approach. The reason is because no one strategy or approach alone will close the gap between concepts of distributed leadership and its practice.

5.4 Fourth finding – Framework to guide planning and design of organisational development

The fourth finding is while it is not possible to develop a prescriptive approach which is directly transferrable to other organisations, the core concepts which were used to guide the planning and design of distributed leadership at ViTA South are potentially transferrable and have been integrated into a framework shown as Figure 18. It is anticipated that organisations, with a similar culture and context, may use this new framework to analyse their own organisational development requirements for introducing distributed leadership. This framework can guide the design of their own tailored organisational development necessary to translate the concept of distributed leadership into practice in their organisation.
This framework is an evolution of the conceptual framework which was developed for this research and presented in Chapter 2. It has evolved to incorporate the learnings gained from the experience of this research. The left hand side of the framework outlines five key concepts as options for organisations to consider. The right hand side describes what was used at *VITA South*. 
**Research informed framework to guide tailored organisational development to translate the concept of distributed leadership into practice**

This framework is designed to assist organisations interested in developing distributed leadership in their own organisation.

It is difficult to imagine a different future when we refer only to our historical experience which is often gained from working within hierarchical systems.

To develop a distributed leadership we need to change our underlying thinking & assumptions.

It is intended to guide the development of new thinking required to inform the design of organisational development to create the conditions for staff to exercise distributed leadership.

### To develop new thinking

- Take a long term view of the change as this will be required to develop distributed leadership
- Identify a change agent to have a focus on facilitating the systematic, deliberate approach to developing distributed leadership
- Identify (or develop) sensegiving tools to describe what is meant by distributed leadership in your organisation
- Design a systematic deliberate approach to designing, implementing & testing strategies designed to create the conditions for staff to exercise distributed leadership
- When planning leadership development training include strategies which aim to develop leadership of a group.

### Example of what shaped thinking at ViTA

- Sensegiving tools chosen were:
  - SE Conceptual Framework
  - Action Self Enabling Resource (ASERT)
  - Health LEADS Australia: The Australian Health Leadership Framework
- An action research design was adopted which involved 3 cycles running over 18 months & utilised logic modelling as a process to facilitate the development of strategies designed to create the conditions for staff to exercise distributed leadership
- Leadership development included coaching & mentoring, experiential learning incorporated into action learning groups, formal leadership team meetings

### Accessing the sensegiving tools which were used by ViTA

ASERT and SE Conceptual Framework can be found by visiting [www.distributedleadership.com.au](http://www.distributedleadership.com.au)

Health LEADS Australia: The Australian Health Leadership Framework can be found on the online Health Leadership Australia Resource Centre: [https://healthleadsaustralia.org.au/](https://healthleadsaustralia.org.au/)

### References


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*Figure 18 Framework to guide choice and design of organisational development to create the conditions for staff to exercise distributed leadership*
5.5 Applications to professional practice

While the primary contribution for this research has been the organisational development within ViTA South there are three primary applications for professional practice informed by this research. Firstly it has described a substantive and deliberate process that led participants in the study toward developing distributed leadership in practice. Secondly it provides an important contribution to the broader research community by presenting a case study that addresses the gap that exists in the literature in understanding how distributed leadership is enacted on the ground. Third it provides a valuable insight for people to reflect, anticipate and understand the barriers and enablers to enacting distributed leadership in practice. One of the key lessons learnt has been the critical value of logic models to help organisations interested in understanding how they may go about creating the conditions for staff to exercise distributed leadership in their own organisations. Practitioners may be able to draw from insight gained from reviewing the ViTA South experience to influence their own sensemaking process needed to develop distributed leadership within their own setting.

This research reflects Spillane and Coldren’s (2011) recommendation for overcoming the barriers to collaborative practice. That includes moving beyond hierarchical leadership to redesign aspects of organisational infrastructure, such as routines and tools, to introduce distributed leadership. In so doing, this research may assist health and aged care service planners identify what existing workplace structures and processes within their services may need to be changed to support the distribution of leadership. Similarly they may identify what new workplace structures and processes their services need to develop to support the distribution of leadership. In addition the findings from this research may also help other health and aged care service planners who may be interested in utilising the Health LEADS Australia framework to incorporate the concept of distributed leadership within their services.

Although it was not within the scope of this research to measure impact of distributed leadership on generating sustained collaborative practice at ViTA South the case examples do indicate that progress has been made toward developing sustained
collaborative practice. The new workforce structures and processes have been established and appear to be operating toward supporting sustained collaborative practice.

The findings – at least in the context of the ViTA South case – demonstrate the importance of the sensemaking process. It shows how organisations interested in undertaking organisational development can create the conditions for staff to exercise distributed leadership within their own context. It also highlights the benefits of using logic models such as outlined in Chapter 4. The use of logic modelling frames the problems and solutions/strategies to be tested in order to create the conditions for staff to exercise distributed leadership in their own settings. For practitioners it provides an example of how they can note and select information from the environment, make meaning of that information, and then act on these interpretations, developing their own culture, social structure and routines over time.

This research may assist business practitioners to conceptualise an alternate approach to leadership development, which looks beyond developing individuals to viewing leadership as an activity. This research has provided a practical example of what is meant by this alternate approach to leadership development. It has also demonstrated how sensemaking, action research and logic modelling in concert have been valuable within the leadership development approach adopted for ViTA South.

This research has drawn on existing research from the higher education sector in developing and sustaining distributed leadership. It is hoped that these researchers in higher education may also be able to use this research to further advance their own work in the field of distributed leadership.

Internally within ACH Group plans are underway to replicate the ViTA South model in other states of Australia and also overseas. This research has been integral to informing the operational models for all future ViTA developments.
5.6 Outputs from this research

In addition to the findings there have been three outputs from this research:

1. An operational model designed specifically for the context of ViTA South which will guide the ongoing leadership development to create the conditions for staff to exercise distributed leadership at ViTA South.

2. A research thesis which contains a practical demonstration of one organisational development approach undertaken toward creating the conditions required for staff to exercise the concept of distributed leadership in the setting of ViTA South.
   a. The design of the action research and structure of this thesis have enabled the presentation of unique insights into the organisational development process undertaken by ViTA South to create the conditions for staff to exercise the concept of distributed leadership.
   b. The documented logic models presented in Chapter 4 demonstrate the springboard for advancing the long term vision for ViTA South. The logic models documented and guided the work undertaken toward creating the conditions for staff to exercise distributed leadership. These also provide a framework to inform a future realist evaluation to test the strategies in action at ViTA South.

3. A conceptual framework to shape and inform the design of context-specific organisational development required to create the conditions for staff to exercise the concept of distributed leadership.

5.7 Recommendations for further research

This research has identified four key areas which would benefit from further research. The first area is informed by the limitations of this study. This research was a part of a formative process for developing strategies to create the conditions for staff to exercise distributed leadership. This study was not designed to measure the impacts of distributed leadership on improving service delivery or health outcomes. A future outcomes evaluation of distributed leadership in action at ViTA South could be valuable.
One approach to an outcomes evaluation would involve designing a realist evaluation of the strategies in action at ViTA South. Realist evaluation seeks to examine program theory to identify what works and for whom (Pawson, 2006). This could help in further refining and improving the logic models informing strategies to create the conditions for staff to exercise distributed leadership at ViTA South.

A further potential area of future research is the format of leadership development training that is required to support distributed leadership. Future research could identify specific approaches within formal training requirements which help people facilitate the development of distributed leadership. This future research could be used to inform the future structure, content and delivery of training requirements for both formal and informal leaders. The research would seek to identify what skills and knowledge formal leaders need to be able to undertake diagnosis and design to develop health and aged care services which enable staff to exercise distributed leadership. The research would also seek to identify leadership training needs for front line operational staff to enable them to succeed in working in an environment that supports distributed leadership.

A further opportunity for future research relates to validating the tools used within this research for use in health and aged care. The ViTA South formal leadership team found the ASERT and 6E valuable within their sensemaking process of what distributed leadership in practice means. The ASERT and 6E were designed for use within the higher education sector and at the time of this research had not been validated for the use in health or aged care.

Finally a further area for future research was identified through the site manager interviews undertaken as part of this research study. There was an emphasis made in all the interviews of the potential negative impacts which the Australian Aged Care Accreditation Standards may have on distributed leadership. Therefore it would be of interest to study the impacts of regulation on the conditions for distributed leadership.
5.8 Summary and Study Conclusions

The research facilitated the process of interpreting current health leadership theory for use and application in the practice-based setting of ViTA South. The research design was tailored to change practice and to further advance our understanding on what is known about how to develop distributed leadership.

This research has demonstrated an organisational development approach undertaken by ACH Group to generate sustained collaborative practice. This has involved the interpretation and application of contemporary leadership theory within the new operational model developed for ViTA South. The process of designing a new operational model for ViTA South involved a process of designing, implementing and testing that took place during three action research cycles over an 18 month period. It was identified at the outset that the research literature was deficient in this area.

This research has facilitated a process within the operational model for ViTA South to operationalise the concept of distributed leadership. The research employed long term thinking to invest time in developing preparatory and anticipatory linkages required to create the conditions for staff to exercise distributed leadership at ViTA South. To apply Pawson's (2006) analogy, this research and the model developed through this research ‘provides the runway for change’ in leadership with an ongoing long term vision.

The literature review demonstrated that there was no evidence-based organisational development approach identified that could be used to create the conditions necessary for staff to exercise distributed leadership. This research has contributed to addressing this gap by providing a practical example of an evidence-based organisational development approach designed to introduce distributed leadership.

The research methodology integrated action research methods into existing operational practices of ViTA South. It was structured to provide a guide to an evidence-
based organisational development approach to create the conditions necessary for staff to exercise distributed leadership.

The future plan for *ViTA South* is to continue to refine and improve the operational model as a guide to continue to advance distributed leadership. A future step will be to undertake a summative evaluation to measure the strategies and their mechanisms in action at *ViTA South*. This evaluation, by adopting a realist approach, would aim to test what works, for whom and in what context. This could provide real benefits beyond *ViTA South*. In developing an understanding of what works, for whom, and in what context, the potential exists to provide a further step toward filling the gap which exists in evidenced approaches which may be transferrable to other collaborative healthcare contexts.

### 5.9 Further fictional scenario involving Molly

This thesis concludes with a further narrative about the fictional character named ‘Molly’. The scenario has been revised to show the differences this research would make in the case of Molly.

*Molly is a 95 year old retired seamstress whose health has been slowly declining to the point where she can no longer live independently. In recognition that she needed full time support she shopped around to choose a nursing home to move into. She opted to move into *ViTA South* which is a new state of the art teaching research aged care facility. She chose *ViTA South* as it has a gym and a healthy ageing approach to service delivery. This approach appeals to Molly as she wants to keep mobile and prevent unnecessary deconditioning so she can keep doing the things she loves like volunteering and learning new things. Molly also liked the idea that as a resident of *ViTA South* she could contribute to shaping the future health workforce through influencing the students who have their clinical placements at *ViTA South*. Molly has a range of chronic conditions including type 2 diabetes and she wants to shape the students’ thinking about how these impact her life. She is really keen to make sure these students don’t see only*
her chronic diseases but see her as a person, as a grandmother, as a person who wants to continue to maximise the most of life through her volunteering and other activities.

The day Molly moved into ViTA South she found it enjoyable meeting an array of different health professionals all interested in knowing about her as a person. During the day she shared different aspects of her story with health professionals. She was glad to not have to repeat her story and case history again and again like she did when she was in hospital recently. While all well-intentioned and passionate about what they were doing these health professionals were pushed for time however in her words ‘the admission process felt seamless’.

Behind the scenes at ViTA South all the health professionals who had visited Molly on her first day were working collaboratively toward developing a plan to support Molly to achieve her goals of staying mobile and engaged. The plans they were preparing are enhanced by the flexible, responsive systems at ViTA South. Through participation in the various forums including the ‘ViTA South Action Learning Groups’ the health professionals had contributed to the original design of the systems for ViTA South. They continue to remain actively involved in the review and constant improvement of the systems to ensure they remain responsive to the resident’s needs. The health professionals have an understanding of how the practical day to day operations of service delivery at the frontline with residents are also contributing to achieving the visible strategic goals. The health professionals appreciate the culture that has been developed which supports and maximises collaboration. They believe that this will contribute to their capacity to enable optimal outcomes for Molly.

The work they have undertaken within the ‘ViTA South Action Learning Groups’ has enabled creative approaches to enable them to undertake joint planning, joint decision making as they work alongside other health professionals from disciplines different to their own.

The recent health care graduates employed at ViTA South are experiencing firsthand what it means to work ‘interprofessionally’. They value the opportunity to work
with two or more professions to undertake joint decision making and planning and in doing so learn from, with and about one another. In their opinion interprofessional collaborative practice is not something just talked about at university they actually participate in interprofessional collaborative practice at ViTA South.

The health care professionals are encouraged by the opportunities the systems at ViTA South provide which enable them to lead themselves, engage with others toward achieving outcomes and ultimately shape the systems they were working in including driving innovation. The formal leaders want the systems, structures and processes to enable the healthcare professionals to continue to do all of this....but they recognise it is not easy and it will require ongoing consistent effort but the systems and structures designed through this research study provides them with a foundation to keep trying.

This is where this fictional scenario ends and this research thesis ends. However the ongoing commitment to improving the lives of older people at ViTA South continues.