

UNLEASHING CHAMPIONS

How do champions in publicly-managed water agencies drive more sustainable approaches? The question is at the heart of my research at the National Urban Water Governance Program at Monash University, which examined individual attributes of champions, the group-based leadership processes they commonly drive and the contextual factors that encourage their emergence and effectiveness.

It has also produced management strategies to foster the champion phenomenon. Here is some of what we know about these champions who work at a project level in water agencies.

1. They share many personality characteristics. These champions have many distinctive characteristics compared to leaders in control groups. These include high levels of openness to experience, confidence, motivation, determination and the propensity to focus on communication.

They also are motivated by growth and achievement, and have relatively low levels of the agreeableness trait. Other strongly developed characteristics include persistence, energy, enthusiasm and a strategic perspective.

Some of these characteristics help to explain their effectiveness as emergent leaders. For example, their openness to experience leads to a diverse range of work experiences, which helps to produce powerful social networks, resilience, a big picture view and the ability to engage in systems thinking. It also helps to build high levels of personal power.

Such characteristics can be used to identify potential and actual champions during recruitment or in developing nascent leaders.

2. They are good at building particular types of knowledge. These champions usually have high levels of strategic, normative and relational knowledge.

Normative knowledge refers to the ability to understand the norms and values of one's organisation and broader institutions.

The most effective of these champions have unusually high levels of political knowledge and general knowledge of their industry. Political knowledge helps them to 'influence upwards', such as when they are seeking executive and political support for a new initiative. It also helps them identify opportunities to drive change.

Strong general knowledge helps them understand how their organisation and industry operates, the systemic impact of new initiatives, and how to communicate and collaborate with a wide variety of stakeholders. It also helps them build social networks, credibility among their peers and personal power.

Champions can be catalysts for change and strongly drive more sustainable practices. André Taylor sheds some light on the champion phenomenon.



Awareness of the types of knowledge that effective champions possess can be used during leadership development initiatives. For example, developing champions in water agencies would be wise to have mentors who can teach them how the political system operates.

3. They use key behaviours at different times. Project champions in public water agencies typically drive processes of influence that have three phases.

The first is the Initiation phase. Common behaviours during this phase include: scanning behaviours, such as using their networks to monitor their external environment for opportunities; developing and communicating shared visions for new projects; strongly promoting new ideas; and transformational leadership behaviours such as questioning the status quo and frequently demonstrating enthusiasm, energy, vision, confidence, persistence and optimism.

During the subsequent Endorsement phase, these champions try to gain executive and political support for the new project or policy. Typical behaviours include: building advocacy coalitions; working with executive champions; working with mentors to learn how to anticipate, plan for and exploit windows of opportunity; building strong relationships with key executives and politicians; and making representations to senior decision-makers.

During the Implementation phase, these champions work with other leaders to deliver the initiative, often in cross-boundary, multi-disciplinary project teams. Typical behaviours include: getting others involved at the right time; forming and managing project teams; using pilot projects; building trust; coordinating the

activities of several leaders; and demonstrating a range of interpersonal skills such as active listening and conflict resolution.

Awareness of these behaviours can be used during tailored leadership development programs that help participants to use certain leadership behaviours at key times.

4. They build and use particular forms of power. These champions have high levels of personal power, which they use in preference to position power. Sources of personal power include knowledge, social networks and the credibility they established over time from delivering positive outcomes. It typically takes these champions about five years in their organisations to become highly effective as it takes this time to build knowledge, relationships and power.

5. They are advanced social networkers. Champions are very good at forming relationships to gather information, build advocacy coalitions, build power and exercise influence.

They typically show a preference for the 'strong-tie strategy' of social networking, meaning they build strong, reciprocal relationships with key people. They also develop strong networks that cross managerial levels and organisational boundaries.

The most effective of these champions are unusually good strategic networkers, meaning they develop relationships to help deliver their organisations' long-term goals. In public water agencies, this usually involves developing relationships with key executives and politicians.

This can be used in the context of mentoring, coaching, training and leadership development programs to help developing champions become more effective networkers.

6. They are strongly affected by contextual factors. Sustainable urban water management champions are greatly assisted by organisational cultures that are characterised by a commitment to learning, innovation, risk-taking, collaboration and sustainability.

They also benefit from external environments with strong drivers for more sustainable approaches, such as water-related crises, valued waterways that are under threat and rapid population growth.

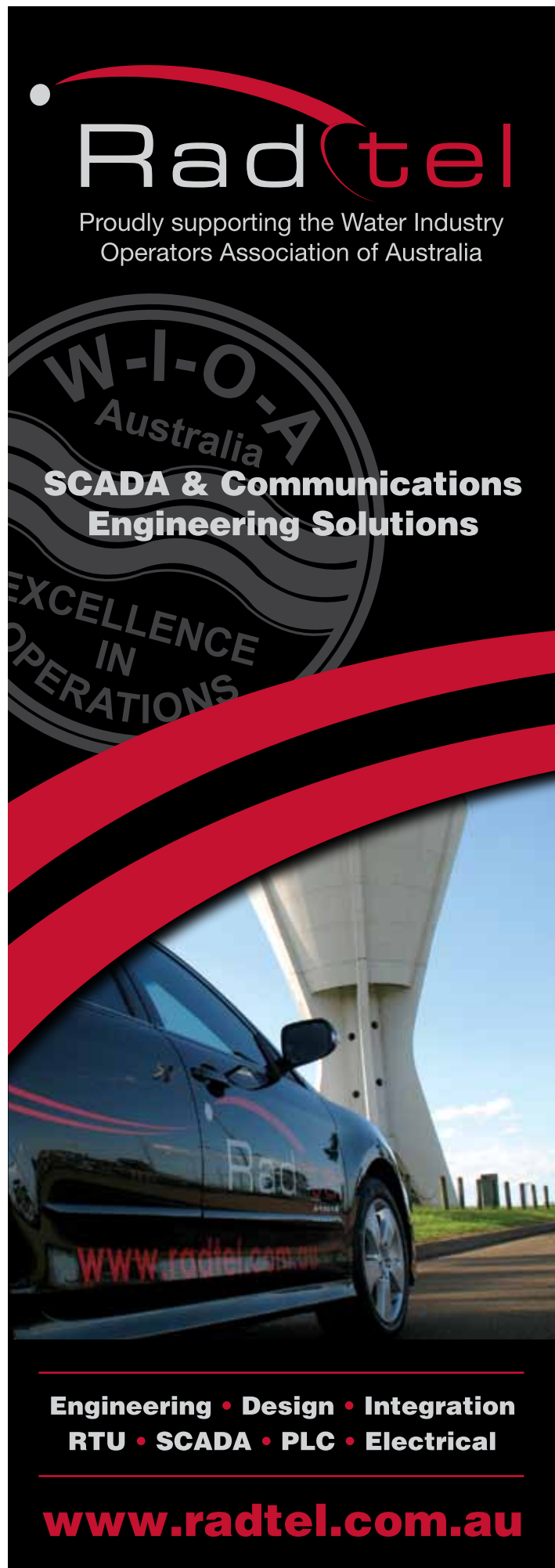
The extent to which the organisation has embraced the philosophy of sustainability is also important. Research by my colleague Rebekah Brown identified five phases of such development in water agencies: Project, Outsider, Growth, Insider and Integrated.

Effective high-profile environmental champions start to be seen at the Growth phase, which is characterised by growing community, managerial and political support, growing in-house resources and a stronger policy framework for sustainable water management.

Champions also thrive as change agents during the Insider and early Integrated phases. This is significant as strategies to foster champions are most applicable to the Growth to early Integrated phases of organisational development in water agencies. These evidence-based insights are the keys to designing strategies to attract, recruit, supervise and develop future environmental champions.

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