

# THE PENGARUH GAME: EAST MEETS WEST

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## **Abstract**

With Pengaruh we intended to develop a serious game, to be used in leadership development programs, that adds value to the already large number of simulations currently available in the market. Pengaruh is based on a Southeast Asian strategy board game, using existing mythological figures, made by Kummara (Bandung, Indonesia). In this paper we assume that leadership impact on teams today is related to the being perceived as trustworthy and the ability to keep others engaged. In order to learn something about trust and engagement, we believe we need to tackle the less tangible elements of the impact one has on others related to trust and engagement, in addition to well defined behavioral feedback. Pengaruh is designed to cover this.

Keywords: Serious gaming, leadership development, feedback, competencies, impact, simulation, engagement, trust, self-awareness.

## **1 COMPETENCY RATINGS AS THE BASIS FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

### **1.1 The use of competencies as an established practice in leadership development**

In the last two decades, leadership development has focused on the competencies that enable a leader to succeed in the eyes of their stakeholders. On the one hand, research has led to lists of competencies that appear to be relevant for leaders across industries and cultures, leading to tools to rate the competency levels of individual leaders. Examples of well-known leadership assessment tools are the Lomingers Leadership Architect® [1] or Benchmarks® by the Center for Creative Leadership [2]. On the other hand, large organisations have put efforts into designing their own competency lists, customized to their needs. This practice has professionalized over the years.

Given the level of professionalization of defining relevant and useful competencies by leadership institutes as well as companies, currently these lists of competencies are usually quite complete and of good quality. The work that continues to be done is related to strategic change in the organisation, making some competencies more or less relevant or requiring different definitions, or companies' practices, that require simplifications, for example. We believe we can safely say that it will be hard to add something completely new in the field of leadership competencies.

As to what is currently considered as being important, during the last decades the thinking has shifted from a focus on directing others to enabling and influencing others. Also, there are organisations who even replaced the word 'leader' with 'influencer'. We might therefore cautiously conclude that impact is a more important feature of leadership than hierarchical position, and that the way leaders are able to impact others is related to the development level of their 'soft skills'. This thinking has been widely applied in leadership ratings by embedding 'soft skills' linked to enabling and influencing others into the competency lists.

### **1.2 Related to leadership impact, one has to rely on "imperfect" measurements**

Given the level of sophistication in identifying and applying all the relevant competencies needed to be influential, one would assume that a leader who 'ticks all the boxes' in a 360 degree feedback survey is very influential. However even the most complete competency list does not always fully capture the impact a leader has on others. This is partly because we simply do not have full access to all the relevant data to rate a competency level. In addition to this, people rate others in different ways because different things matter to them. Even if competencies are described fully behavioural and factual, raters can interpret them differently. Human ratings on a scale is and will always stay an imperfect measurement of what someone's real impact is on others. We regularly observe that what is

really important to a respondent in a 360 survey is captured in the written comments at the end of the survey; and not seldom, these comments also give additional insights into the way a leader influences his stakeholders.

As this is generally accepted, organisations never fully rely on the outcome of a survey for important career decisions and individual leaders will always analyse their scores on surveys carefully (with or without the help of a skilled interpreter) to make decisions about the direction of their personal and professional development. In addition to this, a lot of organisations make use of engagement surveys to assess the level of engagement of individuals in the organisation, related to different aspects of the work and the environment, including their leaders. This adds to an understanding of the way a leader impacts his/her environment. Finally, it is recognized that no leader can develop without receiving regular direct, on the spot, feedback from their stakeholders about their performance and behaviour, and how this impacts their environment.

## **2 THE IMPORTANCE OF FEEDBACK IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

### **2.1 Feedback requires a safe environment**

Whereas leaders need face to face feedback in order to be able to develop personally and professionally, giving developmental feedback is something most people are uncomfortable with, mostly because they are afraid it might disrupt working relationships.

It is for this reason that in corporate training and development programs a lot of time is spent on giving and receiving feedback related to participant's performance as reported in 360 degree feedback instruments as well as during role plays, problem solving activities, experiential learning interactions and guided business simulations. The Center for Creative Leadership, a global leadership development organisation that ranked 4 overall in the 2014 Financial Times worldwide survey of executive education, mentions Feedback Intensive Programs as a representation of their best practice [3]. One of the factors contributing to the success of these programs is that giving and receiving feedback in a relatively safe environment, facilitated by trained professionals, is easier. In order to learn how to give constructive feedback, organisations also train their staff in communicating feedback in an appropriate and structured way. This also lowers the threshold to give feedback to others.

### **2.2 The added value of non-behavioral feedback in leadership development programs**

Feedback in leadership development programs is generally behavioral. The reason for that is that behavioral feedback is actionable (at least in most cases) which enables a person to change his/her behavior and increase their impact. However in some cases it is difficult for a participant to give behavioral feedback, for instance when they are not sure whether the behavior of the focus person really led to the impact on them. For example: a blind folded participant is led by another person to lead him from one place to another, with the aim of getting there fast and safely. The blind folded person was scared and not sure whether he could trust his 'leader'. During the feedback afterwards, he is not sure if this was just his sense of 'losing control' that made him feel uneasy, or the way his leader guided him. It could also be that he sensed an insecurity in the leader that made him uncomfortable and decreased his trust in her, without being able to relate this directly to specific behavior of this leader. In these kind of experiential activities, the leader can receive this more ambiguous feedback without knowing what in her behavior could have made him feel differently. If this activity is just a part of a bigger program, she could gradually learn more about her impact combining experiences and feedback during different activities. However when the program duration is limited, the person would probably not get many other chances to receive feedback on how they are trusted by others.

Whereas we do believe in the value of behavioral feedback in leadership development programs, we also believe that additional non-behavioral or ambiguous feedback about a person's impact can also create new learning opportunities in a leadership development program, when guided well. (This however only applies to feedback in the context of learning and development. Personal feedback as part of a formal appraisal should always be behavioral!). Focusing feedback on the *impact* the feedback giver experiences, without linking this linearly to behaviors that caused this impact, might even improve the quality of individual insights. This is because it stimulates reflecting on alternative hypotheses. For instance, the group could reflect upon the hypothesis that part of the resistance a

person experienced when the leader requested something of him, could be a function of the words the leader used as well as the association the feedback giver has with a past experience, or both. Another hypothesis could be related to external factors ("It was very hot inside and I was bored, therefore I felt resistance related to everything that kept me in that room").

We strongly believe that leadership development programs benefit from stimulating behavioral feedback when possible, but allowing non behavioral feedback related to someone's impact when causality is not that clear. When guided appropriately, this opportunity will enhance understanding about one's personal impact on others and the opportunities and limitations to managing this. Leadership development programs in general enable the safety required to work with this more ambiguous type of data.

### **3 THE RELEVANCE OF TRUST AND ENGAGEMENT FOR TODAY'S LEADERS**

#### **3.1 Impact and trust**

We believe the impact of a leader is primarily driven by our trust in them to represent us well and do and say what we believe is right in the context of what needs to be achieved. Trust has always been a key factor in human interaction, in particular when leadership is concerned. In today's organizations, trust is even more important because leaders have less time to achieve their objectives (2-3 year assignments are not uncommon) and the job that needs to be performed and/or the context is often new. We are never certain someone will live up to our expectations. In many cases there is also not enough real data available about someone's past achievements, because former managers have left the company or the leader is new to the company and has built their experience in a related, but still different area.

Trust can be built and destroyed in short moments of interaction. There is something almost intuitive about trust, which is confirmed by recent neuropsychological research regarding unconscious decision making [4] [5]. We might instantly decide to trust someone before we are even conscious of our reasons for doing this. Given the above, we wanted to focus our activity on trust so that participants could learn more about what made others trust them as their leaders in a context of a short interaction, as well as what made us trust someone else.

As said, what impacts us is different for different people. However, some general things can be said about behavioral factors that contribute to being impactful. With a start already in the late 80's Gary Yukl identified 7 core influence tactics that have been the basis for many theories in organizational change and leadership effectiveness [6]. For example there is evidence that consulting others contributes to gaining their commitment. Also, being inspirational and using rational arguments helps in being persuasive and thus impact an audience. Having said this, *how* to use these behavioral influence tactics effectively is not so easy to define accurately.

Our objective was to create a situation that would enable people to learn about what makes us instantly decide about our trust in leaders and what made other people trust our leadership. Also, what factors build or destroy that trust when working and interacting with one another and how we impact others consciously and unconsciously. We also wanted participants to learn about the developmental benefits of behavioral feedback as well as the potential learning that comes from reflecting on non-behavioral feedback as explained earlier. Therefore Yukl's model is shared as a general framework, but not as a prescriptive model.

#### **3.2 Impact and engagement**

In today's organizations, the new generation of employees wants to be engaged in the broad sense. Except for situations where the industry or the country or both are in a crisis, most employees today would leave their jobs if they feel they are not really involved in or challenged by the work they do. Managers are supposed to take care of their teams and 'developing team members' is an important part of almost every competency list today. As mentioned earlier, engagement surveys are also used by most large organizations to monitor the level of employee engagement. However most managers find it quite difficult to spend enough time with their team members given the full agenda of meetings they already have to manage. Therefore they regularly miss signals that their team members might not be as engaged as they think.

As trust, engagement is a 'container' concept. In engagement surveys it is therefore broken into specific elements that make up engagement. Engagement in organizations is most of all used in the sense of being committed to your job, the organization and the people you work with and for. In relation to impact, Yukls 'rational persuasion', 'consultation' and 'inspirational appeal' tactics, tactics that positively influence commitment, seem to be the most relevant behaviors to focus on if we want others to be engaged.

If we relate engagement to job characteristics, psychological theory regarding human needs and motivation are more relevant. Self-determination theory for instance tells us that *autonomy*, *competence* and *relatedness* are assumed to foster individual motivation and engagement for activities [7]. A lot of academic work regarding change leadership is based on these or related concepts.

Whether the game is engaging for participants depends on their individual needs. As one of the jobs of the leader in the game is to keep his/her team engaged, they need to observe to what extent they are already engaged and find out what they can do to enhance this if needed. Participants will learn about what is needed for them personally to be engaged in a task, and what influence others, including themselves, can have on their level of engagement.

Also in this context some theory will be shared with participants during the debrief, in order to provide them with a framework. However as with trust, most of the learning will come from experiencing what worked and did not work for them in that specific situation.

## **4 PENGARUH, A SERIOUS GAME**

### **4.1 Characteristics of Pengaruh**

The serious game we developed is called Pengaruh, which is 'impact' in Bahasa Indonesia. It is based upon a board game, developed by Kummara, a game studio in Bandung, West-Java, who used Sundanese mythological characters as the basis for the game. We adjusted the rules and developed a new design around the game to convert it into the serious game as described above.

The main objectives of the game are that participants:

- increase their insight into the behavioral and non-behavioral factors that contribute to being trusted as a leader and giving trust to leaders
- increase their insight into the impact one can have as a leader on others' experienced level of engagement

The activity is designed in a way that puts the leaders in the game in a situation that resembles reality: they represent their teams in a competitive strategy game where they have to make strategic decisions under time pressure. In between rounds, they meet with their teams, where they discuss the options. They will have to decide how much of the available time they will spend with their teams or be present in the game. Obviously there are pro's and con's for each choice. Apart from the objective of winning the game and gaining the team's trust, the team leader needs to make sure his/her team is engaged.

Leaders will struggle to find the right balance between being transparent and informative (which adds to being trusted but takes time), involving and inspiring their team members (which adds to engaging the team members) and operating strategically in an environment that might require them to act before being able to consult their team. In this balancing act they might do or say things that make the team doubt whether this is the right leader for their team. Or things might happen beyond their knowledge that contribute to doubts about whether they really know what they are doing, whether they are competent enough to lead us, or whether they pay attention to the available knowledge in the team or just trust their own knowledge.

The team members have to report their feedback while the leader is playing, and can use the rest of their time in a variety of ways, which can be influenced by the leader.

### **4.2 Why we think Pengaruh can add value in a mature market**

For decades, corporate training programs have used game thinking in role play, interactive indoor and outdoor exercises that enable participants to learn something about themselves and others. Leadership development programs in the late eighties relied heavily on MBA teaching method (PP

presentations and case studies), but business simulations became soon an important element of these programs. In the early/mid-nineties, soft skill training entered the world of leadership development programs massively.

Today, leadership development programs cannot exist anymore without some form of serious gaming. As Werbach argues [8], games promote intrinsic motivation because they directly affect the 3 main motivational factors as identified by Deci and Ryan: competence, autonomy and relatedness. [7]. Given the amount of development programs some people participate in during their careers, new games need to be introduced on a regular basis. Participants usually find it irritating to be confronted with the same game several times. Also, upcoming generations are used to a huge variety of online games and can get easily bored. Last but not least, the clients in these markets are often facilitators themselves. In the current mature market they are always looking for something new. We therefore think there is always room for something new in this already sophisticated market.

In comparison with some other serious games and simulations Pengaruh is very simple to explain and execute, why we think it adds value in this sophisticated market: it can be played in 3 hours with 16 people, everyone can have a leadership role and a team role, and there is time for meaningful reflection afterwards. No IT-infrastructure is needed except the use of 4 tablets. The design is purposely kept simple, without preprogrammed interventions, intended to evoke natural behavior.

### **4.3 Future plans with Pengaruh**

We used mythological characters from a for most people different culture to introduce an element of game thinking that has not been used in training that often yet, but is frequently used in pc games. The characters are embedded in ancient Asian storytelling. We hope to be able to expand this element in our next version, were we can use the power of storytelling to convey messages about leadership and learning. This version of Pengaruh is also our first step towards developing a multi-platform leadership development game. One extension we are considering is to develop a little mobile game that can be played with others after the program, helping the participant to remind themselves of what has been learned. Finally, we are excited about our plans to develop a truly online version that can be played by teams working and learning in different places.

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