

Kim Turnbull James

Leadership in context

Lessons from new
leadership theory and
current leadership
development practice



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The views expressed are those of the author and not of the commission.

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1 Executive summary

This paper draws on academic leadership literature and leadership development practice but is not based specifically on the health care literature or on health care leadership development. Its purpose is to outline some of the latest thinking in leadership theory and leadership development, regardless of sector, in order that the implications for health care can be debated.

The paper suggests that a traditional conception of leadership, in which leadership is largely equated to leaders' competences, behaviours and values, needs at the very least to be expanded if leadership development can meet the needs of complex organisations in the 21st century. Three contentions are explored in this paper, each having an impact on leadership development practice:

- that leadership involves multiple actors who take up leadership roles both formally and informally, and importantly, share leadership by working collaboratively, often across organisational or professional boundaries
- that leadership can be distributed away from the top of an organisation and this distribution takes the form of new practices and innovations as well as 'leaders at many levels'
- that leadership needs to be understood in terms of leadership practices and organisational interventions and not just in terms of leader attributes and leader-follower relationships.

The implications for leadership development are that:

- while competent leaders are important, development that is focused on leader attributes alone will be insufficient to bring about desired organisational change
- leadership development needs to be deeply embedded and driven out of the context and the challenges that leaders in the organisation face collectively
- such leadership development focuses on roles, relations and practices in the specific organisation context and requires conversations and learning with people who share that context.

Three case studies of leadership development programmes which incorporate these ideas are offered. They do not constitute a blueprint – as, indeed, the paper suggests that leadership development needs to be contextual – but are examples of the application of the principles explored in this paper.

2 Lessons from new leadership theory

Over recent years the increasing complexity of organisations has led to an interest in leadership not limited to formally appointed leaders or top leaders. There is much evidence that leadership is important throughout an organisation and not just in roles labelled 'leader'. Top leaders may not have 'sufficient and relevant information to make highly effective decisions in a fast-changing and complex world' (Pearce and Conger 2003, p 2) and many critical leadership issues cannot be addressed by single leaders, even at the top. Such examples include: collaboration rather than competition among senior business unit managers; changes involving many teams or units rather than falling within any one manager's remit; breaking down 'silo thinking' and adopting cross-organisation processes.

The new leadership model is differentiated from more traditionally individualistic models of leadership (Senge and Kaeufer 2001; Fletcher and Kaeufer 2003; Fletcher 2004). Rather than a focus on a set of personal characteristics and attributes, in new constructions of leadership, people who are normally thought of as leaders, heads of departments, directors, team leaders, etc, are acknowledged to be supported by a network of people engaging in leadership practices throughout the organisation and who may never acquire the label of leader; social networks, teamwork, shared accountability all contribute to leadership. For these to be effective, organisations need to encourage spontaneous collaborations and support people working together to introduce new initiatives.

This idea is encapsulated in the idea of postheroic leadership:

... postheroic leadership re-envisioning the 'who' and 'where' of leadership by focusing on the need to distribute the tasks and responsibilities of leadership up, down, and across the hierarchy. It re-envisioning the 'what' of leadership by articulating leadership as a social process that occurs in and through human interactions, and it articulates the 'how' of leadership by focusing on the more mutual, less hierarchical leadership practices and skills needed to engage collaborative, collective learning. It is generally recognized that this shift – from individual to collective, from control to learning, from 'self' to 'self-in-relation', and from power over to power with – is a paradigm shift in what it means to be a positional leader.

(Fletcher 2004, p 650)

It has even been suggested that the heroic model never accurately represented leadership realities, even historically (Gronn 2002; 2003; Fletcher and Kaeufer 2003; Seers *et al* 2003). Simpson and Hill (2008) explore Wilberforce's leadership and the abolition of the slave trade. Despite the popular identification of Wilberforce as the leader associated with abolition, they argue that his role was one among many people not identified as 'leaders' but who nonetheless took key leadership roles in the momentous change; conversational processes, power relations between different interest groups, and the interplay of the 'Clapham group' with wider social movements all challenged accepted values and beliefs, leading to abolition. Leadership is relational (Uhl-Bien 2006) and contextual (Osborn *et al* 2002); it is insufficiently explained by the notion of leaders and followers.

Three contentions which respond to re-thinking the individualistic idea of leadership are explored in this paper, each having an impact on leadership development practice:

- that leadership in this 'postheroic' world involves multiple actors who take up leadership roles both formally and informally, and, importantly, share leadership by working collaboratively, often across organisational or professional boundaries – thus shared and collaborative leadership is more than numerically having 'more leaders'
- that leadership can be distributed away from the top of an organisation to many levels and this distribution takes the form of new practices and innovations, not just people at lower levels taking initiative as leaders – again, more than simply 'leaders at many levels'
- following on from these ideas, that leadership needs to be understood in terms of leadership practices and organisational interventions rather than just personal behavioural style or competences; the focus is on organisational relations, connectedness, interventions into the organisational system, and changing organisational practices and processes.

2.1 Postheroic, shared and distributed leadership

As the 21st century began, the language of leadership acquired a new vocabulary: dispersed, devolved, democratic, distributive, collaborative, collective, co-operative, concurrent, co-ordinated, relational and co-leadership. However, the terms 'shared' and 'distributed' leadership are by far the most commonly used.

Leadership is considered to be the outcome of dynamic, collective activity, through the building of relationships and networks of influence – it is therefore as much bottom up as top down, with more egalitarian interactions where the person labelled 'leader' behaves in a less hierarchical way than leaders traditionally have done. Roles may even change, with someone labelled 'leader' in one situation but 'follower' with the same people in others. Leadership creates an environment where new knowledge – collective learning – can be co-created and implemented rather than just as the implementation of a top leader plan.

The new leadership focus is on dynamic, interactive processes of influence and learning which will transform organisational structures, norms and work practices (Pearce and Conger 2003). Hierarchical leadership 'is dependent upon the wisdom of an individual leader whereas shared leadership draws from the knowledge of a collective. Further, vertical leadership takes place through a top-down influence process, whereas shared leadership flows through a collaborative process' (Ensley *et al* 2006, p 220).

The shared and distributed leadership concept in the educational literature (Spillane 2006; Spillane *et al* 2000; 2003; 2004) has been a key influence on leadership in UK schools (*see*, for example, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) website). *Shared* leadership in this literature involves multiple entities, but *distributed* leadership involves practices which are 'stretched over' the organisation: for example, developing new methods for improving literacy that involve many aspects of school life.

The distinction between shared and distributed leadership is important and reflects different assumptions about the nature of leadership. Shared leadership assumes an advantage through the aggregate of attributed influence in a group (collective influence), whereas distributed leadership reflects a capacity for collective action (Fitzsimons *et al*, forthcoming). Gronn (2002) uses the term 'concertive' action to explain distributed leadership as spontaneous collaboration, intuitive working relations and institutionalised practice, which together represent an increasing degree of institutionalisation – from unplanned, short-term collaborations to formalised organisational structures. Thus, distributed leadership is more than simply inviting more people to feel empowered as leaders; it is integral to the practices of the organisation.

2.2 Leadership practices rather than leader style

Drath *et al* (2008) also question the traditional assumptions that underpin so much of leadership theory. Contrary to the popular view that leadership cannot be pinned down, in fact, the field has in the past been quite unified and framed by an underlying assumption virtually beyond question until recently. This contested view is that: 'In its simplest form [leadership] is a tripod – a leader or leaders, followers, and a common goal they want to achieve' (Bennis 2007, p 3). Drath *et al* suggest that this notion of leaders, followers and shared goals is an insufficient construction. Because of this limited construction, the development of leaders has been traditionally about leader characteristics, improved influence of followers and shared goals. While they do not argue against using this 'leadership tripod' as a basis for some theory and research, they argue for a comparison with, and the addition of, another approach.

Drath *et al* (2008) propose instead (or in addition) that leadership is conceived in terms of three leadership *outcomes*: (1) direction: widespread agreement in a collective on overall goals, aims and mission; (2) alignment: the organisation and co-ordination of knowledge and work in a collective; and (3) commitment: the willingness of members of a collective to subsume their own interests and benefit within the collective interest and benefit. The essence of leadership is the production of these outcomes. The important questions are not about *inputs* – appointing good leaders, ensuring they have good interactions with followers, and clear goals, but are focused instead on how to produce the *outcomes* – how people can *collectively* produce a shared sense of direction and purpose, what are the types of alignment methods that would work for them, and how people can create conditions for commitment to the organisational strategy.

An established perspective on leadership which incorporates the idea of leadership practices is that of adaptive leadership (Heifetz and Laurie 1997; Heifetz 2009). Adaptive leadership is needed when organisations face challenges which require them to re-think their assumptions and practices, and the leadership required in this instance is very different from that required for technical/professional problems, however complex. The whole basis for the way the organisation operates comes under scrutiny. Heifetz and Laurie identify six capabilities for adaptive leadership which include the capability for creating organisation learning processes, regulating the systemic distress inherent in adaptive work, and keeping above the detail to see the patterns of problems that the organisation experiences. Leaders

make interventions – such as creating pilot organisation units or events which challenge organisational norms – where experiments can take place that will later influence the whole organisation. Such interventions disrupt the status quo but also contain emotions, thus creating the conditions for radical change.

These new approaches to leadership suggest that our understanding of what constitutes leadership needs *expanding*; indeed, without this re-thinking, much actual leadership activity will go unrecognised or undeveloped, and organisations will simply train and develop for 'tried and tested' leadership behaviours – but for conditions that no longer prevail.

3 How can we translate these ideas into leadership development practice?

Leadership theory should, in an ideal world, inform leadership development practice. However, many leadership development programmes lack a clearly articulated perspective on leadership beyond a competence, behaviour and values approach.

Competency approaches have been criticised, with the suggestion that leadership should be developed more collectively and contextually (eg, Drath and Palus 1994; Zaccaro and Horn 2003; O'Connor and Quinn 2004). Leadership development is considered to have ignored the circumstances in which leadership is exercised (eg, Shamir and Howell 1999; Zaccaro and Horn 2003). Indeed, even though new leadership thinking proposes that collective, collaborative and distributed forms of leadership are better leadership models for dealing with contemporary organisation challenges, the leadership development literature still focuses primarily on the individual leader, overlooking new conceptualisations of leadership and instead focusing on skills (eg, DeRue and Wellman 2009; Dragoni *et al* 2009), on the individual's early life experiences (Ligon *et al* 2008; Popper and Amit 2009), and on adult developmental processes (Day and O'Connor 2003; Mumford and Manley 2003; McCauley *et al* 2006). As Day (2000) argues, much leadership development is, in fact, leader development.

In addition, competency frameworks have been criticised (eg, Briscoe and Hall 1999; Bolden and Gosling 2006; Hollenbeck *et al* 2006; Carroll *et al* 2008) as based on past and present successes that may or may not represent skills that will be useful to the future of the organisation (Briscoe and Hall 1999; Carroll *et al* 2008). They promote the idea that leadership can be effectively performed by adhering to a standard set of prescribed behaviours that remain constant regardless of context (Hollenbeck *et al* 2006; Carroll *et al* 2008). They imply that individuals' acts are isolated from those of others and from the organisation (Carroll *et al* 2008). These frameworks look remarkably similar across organisations and sectors, even when 'tailored' to a particular organisation. On the other hand, those who support leadership competency models argue that these models help individuals in assessing their own performance and developmental needs against skills and characteristics that will lead to success in their organisations as these frameworks encapsulate how organisations consciously define leadership for themselves.

Probert and Turnbull James (2011), however, argue that any connection between leadership competency frameworks and the organisation's values, objectives and success is superficial, because these models do not address implicit cultural and psychological processes. Every organisation has embedded unconscious assumptions about leadership. These assumptions have been termed the *leadership concept* (Probert and Turnbull James 2011): the set of schemata and assumptions about leaders and leadership that an organisation has embedded in its culture. These deep-rooted assumptions of organisational members about leadership are usually ignored in leadership development initiatives. As these assumptions shape the way organisational members perceive, act and evaluate leadership, Probert and

Turnbull James suggest that renewing the organisation's leadership concept is the most important role of leadership development initiatives.

Changing the leadership concept is not easy. Working with school leaders who were engaged in a collaborative learning process to adopt shared and distributed leadership practices, Turnbull James *et al* (2007) found that changes from top-down leadership created new organisation dynamics that leaders need skills to handle. Huffington *et al* (2004) also argue that a shift to distributed leadership requires not only a mindset change in the concept of leadership and an understanding of the tasks of leaders at various levels, but also a different understanding of the emotional challenges facing leaders in these settings. The emotional challenges may include fear of giving up feelings of dependency and anxiety about exercising one's own authority as leader on a wider organisational front. To take up new leadership roles can require facing up to and dismantling established assumptions and relations. Changing the leadership concept heightens feelings of vulnerability, simultaneously removing the apparent, if illusory, protection afforded by more traditional hierarchical structures.

This is not to suggest that managers do not also need personal development and an appropriate skill set. These skills may include the meta-skills of being able to learn and make sense of the new situation. Turnbull James and Ladkin (2008) argue that rather than developing 'idealised', generic capabilities, leadership development needs to encourage leaders to understand and respond to their particular contexts and enact the skills and capabilities that are required for their situation and time. The ability to make sense of the situation and create a 'tailor-made' intervention is required. Thus, leadership development is not about a generic competence such as communication, for example, but the ability to understand what kind of message and what kind of conversation is needed and who should be invited to that conversation.

4 Leadership development in practice

To investigate what is happening in current practice, three Executive Development Directors were interviewed: Dr Janet Price, Lester Coupland and Hilary Harris, from Cranfield School of Management Centre for Customised Executive Development, and Alison Temperley, a Director of Cranfield School of Management's Praxis Centre. Cranfield is ranked by the *Financial Times* as the number one UK business school for customised management development programmes, and is in the world top 10. Cranfield works with leading blue chip companies, the public sector, and small- to medium-sized enterprises; although much of its work is with the private sector – for example, financial services and manufacturing companies – it also works in the public sector, including the NHS and the not-for-profit sector. The experiences of Cranfield are therefore a useful guide to what is happening in leadership development, but are not proposed as 'definitive' or representing all new developments. The focus here is on the kind of leadership development programmes business schools provide to clients rather than on OD consultancy, consulting to (top) teams, or executive coaching independent of management development programmes.

4.1 Developing individuals as leaders

Individuals' leadership capability is most commonly addressed through feedback using 360° competence/behaviour assessment, psychometrics and other processes that enable participants to find out how others view their leadership. As this paper argues, much leadership theory is devoted to this in the form of leader attributes – style, values and behaviours. For many people, these questions are a key part of their personal leadership journey and popular on any leadership programme.

A second issue for leadership development is enabling leaders to develop their full potential and to become the kind of leader to which they aspire. This requires methods involving personal insight and awareness; the leader needs to reflect on their personal history, their experiences and upbringing, their assumptions and values, and risk trying out new ways of being. The learning methods needed for this type of development require working in depth: for example, arts-based methods, theatre, using mythology and based on depth psychology to create learning designs which meet the requirement for whole person development (Turnbull James and Ladkin 2008). These methods help leaders connect with their values and align their aspirations for authentic leadership with their actions. Such programmes require a high level of tutor skill – novel methods, updating of content, shifting modes of delivery, and so on – to keep them fresh and relevant. The learning approach is that participants learn on the programme where they can experiment, and then afterwards apply this back at the workplace (Turnbull James and Denyer 2008).

However, within the domain of leader development, it may be important for the development to be situated within the context of the organisation; not in terms of individual competence profiles, but helping individuals to develop by bringing them together, to work on how each participant can operate better in the organisational context in which they are exercising leadership

– and to do so with other significant leaders who champion the programme’s aims. Thus, individuals on the programme may regard this as personal development, but the close connection to senior leaders may impact and change the context to which they will return. An example is explored in case study 1.

Case study 1: Promotion to partner in a professional services firm

This programme aims to support women who have the potential to become partner in an internationally renowned professional services firm. The firm believes that too much female talent is lost when disappointed women leave and that, as a matter of principle, women with excellent track records should be appointed partner as often as men with similar excellent records. Initially, the brief was focused on individual development such as enhancing confidence, but it became clear that the competences for partner level would be an insufficient remit. The lead tutors were invited to interview 24 very senior sponsors of the initiative, new-into-post women partners, and potential participants. From these interviews, it became clear that the design needed to integrate personal development for partnership with their ‘back at the office’ context. In fact, the participants would need to grasp in depth the intricacies and unwritten practices, such as effective impression management, that accompany career progression to senior levels and how those impact them as women high potentials – for example, frequently less likely to engage in self-promotion.

As part of this visibility and context setting, it was agreed that on every programme either the Director for Diversity or the Director for Learning and Development would be present throughout to inform and contextualise the discussions. Senior sponsors would also be highly involved, both on the programme and behind the scenes; part of the contract, made explicit to the participants, was that while not individually attributable, the themes emerging from the programme would be fed back to these senior executives. After every programme, the lead tutors spend many hours working with the executives on clarifying the issues and recommending organisation changes to address them. In turn, the sponsors would have meetings prior to every programme to update the tutors on what was happening at a detailed level in the organisation so that the in-depth discussions on the programme related precisely to current issues.

The programme design reflected this integration and constant articulation of the individual with their context. Participants came from all over their EMEA (Europe, Middle East, India and Africa) region and started the event with a dinner attended by senior people at which two previously circulated articles were debated. One proposes that women’s progression depends on organisations doing business differently, and the other, that women must make personal changes such as becoming more ambitious to adapt to organisational realities. This provokes heated debate at the outset.

During the programme, participants were introduced to research and frameworks for working with personal and organisational challenges for women’s leadership and progression. At every step, the external context and how the women personally take up their roles interact. After each plenary presentation and discussion, the participants worked in small facilitated groups of up to five. In these groups, they were able to address personal

challenges, and with the tutors holding a safe space, were able to work in depth at how their experiences to date might impact their potential and how they could develop beyond self-limiting barriers. Working with women who shared their organisational experience but were relatively distant from their day-to-day work (it is a large region) created co-learning and support. The event itself is followed by personal coaching.

The programme is ongoing, with four cohorts so far. Its success can be seen from what participants report:

'The most important outcome of the programme for me was the opportunity to develop strategies for dealing with the challenges.'

'The programme changed the way I look at my own opportunities and how I make opportunities for others.'

'The attention and focus of the partners who came to the programme to share their insights was motivational – I felt important and valued.'

4.2 Developing organisational leadership: the 'postheroic', collaborative organisation

Issues for organisational leadership development include: enabling participants to understand how the organisation needs to transform to respond to a challenge; how to adopt leadership practices that the organisation needs in order to achieve this transformation; and clarifying how people play their part to realise it and gain an understanding of how this will be achieved collectively with an outcome of more effective leadership work.

These issues may require different learning methods from the personal development of leaders – they are focused on the organisation, rather than personal changes that would result from the exercise of new leadership practice by participants, but do not exclude the possibility of personal learning. Learning methods address a systemic perspective on the organisation and involve leaders from many organisational positions as agents of whole system change. Leaders need to perceive and interpret their world in new ways, understand assumptions governing behaviour in their organisation, and work across boundaries so that new ways of doing business can be established. The methods might be inquiry based, involve action learning and working directly with organisational challenges. The key is learning with others, in and for the specific organisational context. These designs challenge the assumption that a critical mass of people individually developed will lead to organisation change. This approach assumes that the programme itself provides the support for people to work together on real change.

Programmes that promote shared, collaborative and distributed leadership begin with the issues the client faces, and the core approach of the programme is learning in the context of application (Turnbull James and Denyer 2008). One such programme is described in detail in case study 2.

Case study 2: Changing a traditional and competitive organisation into a collaborative enterprise

This is a programme for a major housing association. In the first instance, the specification was very traditional: *leader* development. But they began to realise as discussions evolved that they wanted something that would really shift the culture and how they do their business, rather than simply up-skill their managers. The purpose of the programme is to generate collaborative and shared leadership, to create an organisation in which collaborative and shared leadership are hallmarks of the organisation, to create more engagement with the organisation, and create the conditions for more innovation in the organisation. This purpose coalesced as the leadership top team realised that there is only a limited amount of change that they can personally direct.

The tutor team helped the organisation to realise that what they proposed required deep levels of collaboration requiring social and emotional fluency. The programme would therefore combine development tailored to this purpose and at the same time would have a hard business edge; collaborative learning would be a mechanism for learning about and establishing shared leadership in a highly silo-ed organisation with a traditional hierarchy.

The programme was established as their Leadership Academy: this signalled that it was not just 'a course'. It starts with a three-day event in which participants begin their work in collaborative learning groups and engage in learning events that will enhance their capacity for connecting with each other to learn. This workshop uses a variety of methods from depth psychology, music and theatre, and which are established at Cranfield as approaches for engaging deep learning in a safe environment. The aim is to develop individual and organisation capabilities. Seeded into it are the business projects around which they collaborate.

The three-day workshop is followed by three, facilitated one-day events working in their collaborative learning groups. The projects each group work on are carefully set up to be related to the five-year strategic plan and to bring people from different parts of the business to work together. Where this differs from commonly used projects and action learning sets in leader development is that the Executive made clear that the expected outcome was *how to do collaborative work*, not just the project outcomes.

This was tough to get going. The Executive came to Cranfield initially to work out what the culture needed to become, how this related to strategy, what collaborative working meant in their organisation, and so on. There was a critical moment when the Executive group suddenly realised it was about them personally: they would have to let go and give people space to do more. They would have to adapt their leadership and do it differently if this was going to be a reality for the whole organisation. They then went through the programme with a project on organisation values that they undertook collaboratively, followed by the top 20 senior managers, then the rest of the management group in subsequent cohorts (targeted at the top 250 out of about 1,200 in the organisation). Each cohort had a sponsor who was part of the Executive. They conducted the briefing, spent a day during their residential with the cohort, and then followed the group all the way through. In addition, each project (four collaborative learning groups

with a project per cohort) had a project sponsor: their role was *to model collaborative and shared leadership for their project group*. The commitment of the CEO was absolutely crucial and has remained so more than two years into the Academy, which is ongoing. Although the programme director argued for a diagonal slice through the organisation for each programme, the organisation decided to have more traditional groupings. It is crucial that the approach is precisely designed to stretch but not overpower an organisation, and key choices must be made about what is the appropriate discomfort of challenging learning and what is the discomfort which might undermine learning. Providing an appropriate structure and process throughout the programme for containing the anxiety generated by learning and working in new ways is an important consideration in the design.

The learning from the first three cohorts was published and distributed in the organisation. As the programme has evolved and much project work relating to the strategy has already been done, rather than engage in less important projects, the participants work on embedding shared and distributed leadership in their part of the organisation after the first residential. Lessons from this are also published for internal circulation.

The published outputs are clear evidence of the impact the programme has had on the organisation as a whole. In addition to this, a range of evaluation methods were used, including the evaluation at the end of the three-day workshop, through the facilitated meetings, exchanges with managers yet to attend but observers of others' change, through review meetings, and through a 'House Values' exercise with 300 staff, where the meaning of shared and collaborative leadership for them was explored. The organisation identified significant impacts in three areas: individual behaviours, processes, and the business as a whole. A flavour of these offers insight into the programme outcomes, suggested by these quotes:

'I have learned to tone down my competitiveness with my peers. I realise now that competition in some cases can be counter-productive. I work now much more collaboratively with my peers, which gives me the ability to reflect and learn.'

'The key message here is that we can still be as driven and successful as an organisation, but more mindful of taking everyone along with us. One of the most gratifying things about the project is that we thought we had a couple of experts in the group, but we'd underestimated what the rest of us could offer to the process.'

'This approach took away the security of a rigid project plan... This was an uncomfortable feeling for all of us... In effect, the security of the process existed in the group, not in the structure, and this security promoted a level of interaction and creativity which would have otherwise remained suppressed.'

4.3 The dynamics of taking a leadership role

In developing their leadership programmes, organisations may look at these options and feel that they need leader and leadership development. Of course, this has an element of realism – we need insightful people who care about their staff to lead change. Some programmes will combine elements.

The two approaches, although juxtaposed here, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Of course, leadership development must help those in positional leader roles to have presence, inspire, know and stick to their values, avoid laying their own personal issues onto others, and so on. But often, mixing up the two approaches confuses, and they are not always compatible. Creating more opportunities for sharing or distributing leadership in the organisation might go against personal aspirations to become a highly visible leader; as leaders challenge organisations to behave fundamentally differently, they may upset rather than satisfy followers.

So taking a leadership role requires more than a willingness to develop more leadership capability. In some situations, the challenge is getting people to think of themselves as leaders or as having a leadership role. Without this perception, it is hard to support them in taking up their authority to lead organisational change. Some programmes therefore have to help people identify with being a leader at work and support them in working out what practices they need to adopt with their colleagues to create the change the organisation desires. This is addressed in case study 3.

Case study 3: Taking a leadership identity and taking up a leadership role to implement new strategy

This case study is a non-UK university who appointed a new President with the expectation that he would create a strategy to pull the university onto the international stage. The university executive indeed produced a new strategy which was published on the internet; this was when most of the university staff first saw it. The heads of department were then contacted to attend a meeting when they would be briefed and then they would be expected to lead the changes in their departments. Two problems arose: they did not like or own the strategy; and they saw themselves as academics first, managers a poor second, and not as leaders at all.

The HR Director realised that support was needed. Initially, the expectation was that the development programme would use the university competence framework and approach Cranfield to provide the programmes. However, after intensive discussion, it was agreed that the programmed events would be a combination of personal development supported by coaching and an exploration of the roles the academics and professional staff would play in working with the strategy.

The participants were offered a one-to-one with a coach before the residential. In this, they were able to talk about the issues they faced and their personal concerns. The residential took a mix of professional managers and academic managers away from the campus to a retreat-like atmosphere; around 10 cohorts undertook the programme. The workshop began with an opportunity to think about the nature of leadership in their context – what can leaders do or not do in a collegial context, and what the participants thought leadership might look like in this setting. They explored their own conceptions of leadership and their origins in early life experience, and then were offered alternative ways of construing leadership. As the event progressed and they began to identify with the leadership role, the participants were given feedback on their leadership style through a self-assessment psychometric. They explored the various ways in which leaders

could work with others and how they needed to find what worked for them, and how they could create a leadership role which fitted them personally rather than some generic idea of leader behaviour.

The most challenging part of the programme came when they were asked to look at the strategy and began to identify what it might mean in their department under their leadership. The tutors had to hold a space where participants could work with their feelings about the expectations placed on them. They were then given a framework in which they were asked to consider what they could personally do differently to create a different way of working, however small, that might unlock their unit from carrying on in its usual pattern of business; in other words, they were invited to adopt Gandhi's mantra: 'become the change you want to see'. This work was followed up after the event with personal coaching.

The programme combined personal development and organisational change by allowing groups of people in the organisation to come together and create their own new perspective on what it is to be a leader and identify with a concept of leadership which was specific to their context. The evaluation suggested that although the impact on strategy implementation was indirect, people talked about and took up their leadership roles in more purposive ways. People said it was useful to understand how others experienced the challenges:

'Learning to listen, suspend judgement and question to inform rather than interpret.'

'... an outside perspective on real problems'

'Interesting to discover that although the specifics were quite different, the generalities were very similar.'

5 Conclusions

Leadership development starts with the leadership concept which must represent leadership requirements for the future it desires (James and Burgoyne 2001; Probert and Turnbull James 2011). Leader development is well understood, and examples of programmes and other learning methods such as coaching which support leaders' learning can easily be located. However, the leadership literature has begun to identify that if leadership is to meet the organisational requirements of organisations with complex bureaucracies, with multiple stakeholders, multiple professional practices, politics (with small and big 'p'), working across boundaries within and across organisations, then hoping for a few, or even a whole raft of individuals who can influence deep into an organisation will be insufficient. In addition to good strategic leadership from the top, leadership must be exercised throughout an organisation. Identifying individuals who have leader potential is not the (only) solution. Leadership development 'in context' does not just mean individual leadership development adapted to a specific locale, but means people from that locale coming together to learn to lead together and to address real challenges together.

This is very relevant to the NHS. First, there is clear evidence that health care cannot be led by professional managers alone; involving doctors and other clinicians in leadership roles, sharing leadership in the organisation, is essential for excellent health care outcomes (Ham 2008; Ham and Dickinson 2008; Mountford and Webb 2009). Second, there is evidence that when real organisational change happens in the NHS, there may be 'nobody in charge' (Buchanan *et al* 2007) – people can take up leadership roles and work together even though there is no single project leader. Some of the seminal work on the collective leadership required in pluralist organisations was conducted in health care in a US context (Denis *et al* 1996; Denis *et al* 2001).

Without underestimating the important role chief executive officers (CEOs) play in leading, it must be apparent that if real change is to be embedded in NHS organisations, it cannot be achieved by individuals alone. New conceptions of leadership are needed, and these will demand new leadership development approaches. The case studies offered here are not from the health sector; however, there are parallels with the health care context.

First, individuals can only be effective as leaders if the organisation recognises many collective practices and contributions to the organisation as leadership, and does not solely embrace an idealised idea of the heroic leader. However enticing in a pressured environment, the fantasy that getting the right leader in place will be enough to change the system is untenable.

Second, the health care context requires people who do not identify with being a leader to engage in leadership. Leadership must be exercised across shifts, 24/7, and reach to every individual; good practice can be destroyed by one person who fails to see themselves as able to exercise leadership, as required to promote organisational change, or who leaves something undone or unsaid because someone else is supposed to be in charge. The NHS needs people to think of themselves as leaders not because they are personally exceptional, senior or inspirational to others, but because they can see what needs doing and can work with others to do it.

Third, health care requires colleagues from diverse professions and with competing perspectives on what is important to work collaboratively to meet organisational aims. The NHS requires complicated leadership arrangements with negotiated authority between clinicians and professional managers, between clinicians from different professional backgrounds, across one NHS entity to another, and for innovations and change projects that involve different directorates.

Fourth, developing individuals without working with them to simultaneously change the system will not lead to organisation change. Organisation change is not achieved by the development of unconnected individuals, no matter how much investment is made in this.

Many organisations have acquired the new language of leadership expressed in this paper, yet do not translate this into their leadership development requirements. For example, one recent request to tender talked about shared leadership practices, the need for collective working on a number of specified areas, needing to address problems in which people in the organisation did not collaborate, and the need to co-ordinate across their global activities. The tender then appended a leadership competency framework and asked for detailed descriptions of how the provider would train for each of these in order to address the problem outlined. The assumed educational and learning philosophy embraced by the leadership development procurers was at complete odds with the aims of the programme, suggesting that in this organisation, there was no connection between desired outcomes and desired methods. The programme would be doomed to failure if delivered as requested.

Providers of leadership development are more than happy to lead their clients to new types of leadership programmes. They are challenging but not risky, based as they are in well-evidenced learning methods. However, even the most advanced providers cannot provide the leadership development most organisations really need if there is little grasp of the opportunities for organisational impact that these approaches afford. The public sector is often asked to look to the private sector and adopt best practice; in leadership development, the public sector could be well placed to take a lead in adopting new approaches to leadership development because the main challenges it faces so clearly align with the latest thinking about leadership.

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