

Developing Leadership Capacity

By Glen Robertson & Graham Sharrock

Introduction

On the front cover of Private Eye (issue 1257) David Cameron runs along the embankment calling "Follow me, everyone!" There is no-one else in sight. This gag neatly highlights what is missing from the way we commonly view leadership.

Leadership is often seen in terms of the individual who is given the authority to lead by virtue of their position in the organisation. Their effectiveness depends on their personality (charisma) and also on their ability to adopt those behaviours that are identified as supporting 'good' leadership.

As the Private Eye gag shows, however, that leader may have no-one willing to follow them. In that case, their only claim to the role 'leader' is their job title.

A more useful way of looking at leadership is to see it as a process in which the leader's capacity to lead is bound up with other people's willingness to be led (Haslam et al 2010). In other words, leadership is a relational activity in which leaders emerge as a consequence of the dynamics among a group (or within an organization).

People who are in leadership roles need to understand how these dynamics work and how they can support the leadership process (and thus, organizational objectives) through their own actions.

This is demonstrated by recent research in which outstanding leaders were shown to be those who prioritise the issues that affect people (Tamkin et al 2010). Outstanding leaders see themselves as facilitators, negotiators and role models and identify building and maintaining work relationships as critical success factors. Moreover, during harder economic times, these people still make far better leaders than their controlling and task focused counterparts (Tamkin et al 2010).

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Our approach to leadership is set in this context. We focus on:

- Vision and values (what leadership means to the organization);
- The process of leadership (what leadership means to individuals and groups);
- Supporting leaders to develop (skills, self-awareness and understanding).

We will take each of these in turn, providing examples to illustrate how we can help you.

Vision and Values

Leadership is what enables the organisation (and importantly, the people in it) to be the kind of organisation it wants to be. So the starting point has to be identifying values and a clear vision. The strategic leaders will need to embody those values as well as endorsing and communicating the vision. In turn, everyone else in the organisation will need to accept the values and the vision as relevant and credible.

We can help you to achieve this by working with both strategic leaders and staff across the organisation. Our work with East Lothian Council illustrates our approach.

East Lothian Council identified the need for cultural change so that services could better meet the needs of local people. In collaboration with internal specialists, we created a leadership programme to take strategic leaders through a process of discovery about themselves, their organisation and their environment. The programme employed drama, theatre and outdoor education methods to encourage a creative and physical response to the development of a meaningful vision. Importantly, the processes we used ensured that *people, relationships, environment* remained central to the vision.

The next step was to identify what strategic leaders needed to do (in terms of their approach and actions as leaders) to support the change process.

This programme has provided key outcomes:

- The creation of a complex metaphor “A Place to Grow” to describe the vision of cultural change. This metaphor is being used by the organisation as a core means of communicating the vision and generating commitment for change.
- Many people found the programme personally challenging. They developed strong connections with others in their group, enabling a greater union to develop among the strategic leadership team as a whole. This has provided a foundation of support for leaders going forward.

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- Individuals discovered more about themselves as 'leaders' from the responses and feedback from colleagues as well as from their own experiences on the programme. Many reported that they had developed a new, more confident sense of themselves as leaders in the organisation.

The process of leadership

The beliefs and attitudes individuals hold will shape how they view themselves as potential leaders or followers. Most people have leadership potential given the right circumstances (e.g. a meaningful goal, available support and resources, others who want to be led). By experiencing the process by which a group organises itself into 'leaders' and 'followers', individuals can develop greater awareness of their own capacity to lead and of the needs of those who agree to follow.

The Dynamic Space is an experiential learning programme that provides this opportunity. It takes as its starting point the participating individuals. The journey they each take is unique. The programme combines practical exploration of leadership processes, action learning and 1:1 coaching to support individuals to explore identity, influence, power relations, conflict and ethics in leadership.

An organisation can use The Dynamic Space as a leadership programme for employees. Alternatively, aspects of it can be taken and tailored to create something new (as we did for East Lothian Council).

In keeping with the approach, our Executive Coaches are skilled in applying creative methods. This means that individuals can also use the 1:1 coaching relationship to explore body language, voice and style of presentation to increase their personal effectiveness.

Supporting leaders to develop

Many different kinds of people within an organisation need to demonstrate leadership: from team leaders on the frontline to senior managers and executives. A manager shows leadership when she addresses performance issues; as does a team member when he challenges a colleague who is flouting safety procedures; as does a team leader when she picks up on an idea from one of her staff about how to improve practice and gets it implemented; as does the chief executive when he gives a clear, consistent and positive message in response to growing doubt and anxiety among staff.

We design and deliver tailored workshops to meet the needs of these different kinds of leaders. These workshops use drama, active and experiential learning methods: e.g. scenarios (presented by actors) which people can interact with, role play and drama exercises. Through them people develop understanding, skills and the confidence to apply strategies to their own work context. Where relevant and useful we employ models and frameworks.

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Key themes we cover are:

- transformational leadership (what does it look like and how do I do it?)
- influencing and persuading (for senior level staff)
- motivating and engaging (for staff with any team leader responsibility)
- managing conflict (for staff at all levels)
- interpersonal dynamics (for staff and teams at all levels).

With the University of Exeter we applied a transformational leadership approach to support cultural change. The change was necessary to support a key organisational goal: to become one of the UK's top 10 universities by 2012. The programme we developed was called "engaged performance". It was aimed at heads of school and service as well as key professional and academic staff. The aim was to help people to understand their role in providing direction and purpose by engaging and empowering teams and individuals to achieve organisational goals.

In 2009 the University achieved a top-ten ranking in one of the national league tables, three years ahead of schedule. The organisation's commitment to "Engaged Performance" was one of the key factors in achieving this goal.

Contact us

For more information about what is discussed here, or anything else about our work, please contact Glen or Graham.

References

Haslam S.A., Reicher S.D. & Platow M.J. (2010) *The New Psychology of Leadership: Identity, Influence and Power*. London & New York: Psychology Press.

Tamkin P., Pearson G., Hirsh W. & Constable S. (2010) *Exceeding Expectations: the Principles of Outstanding Leadership* London, The Work Foundation.

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