



# UNDERSTANDING LEADERSHIP

*Challenges and reflections*

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## Introduction

The purpose of this book is to act as a resource to support your personal review and reflection on your effectiveness as a leader. Throughout the book we have tried to provide you with a range of ideas, research and information that will provide a stimulus for your thinking. Our approach is deliberately challenging and we make no apology for what might be seen as somewhat confrontational language and questioning.

Challenge is one of the most significant factors in effective learning. In many respects we follow Socrates in his use of the aphorism 'know thyself' and the assertion at his trial that 'the unexamined life is not worth living'. Leadership cannot be taught; it has to be learnt. Questioning, interrogating and analysing ideas and practice are fundamental to that learning process. This book is not an academic text, nor is it a self-help manual. We hope that it is both intellectually coherent and challenging, and professionally relevant and supportive.

We have tried to draw on an eclectic range of sources to encourage as many alternative perspectives as possible. Generally, we have tried to use evidence-based sources, although sometimes we have drawn on anecdotal insights and personal observations as well as the occasional indulgent polemic.

The distinctive nature of this book is the regular opportunities it provides to stop reading and review and reflect on the messages and implications for your understanding of leadership. At frequent intervals the text is interspersed with questions, challenges and opportunities for personal reflection, and each chapter ends with a structured review to help identify your strengths and possible areas for development. Equally, we hope

that you will find this book to be a useful resource in your work with your coach and as part of your appraisal process. Some of the topics might well lend themselves to supporting collaborative learning opportunities through shared review and reflection.

It might also be worth considering keeping a journal as an aid to review and reflection as you read through the book. We recognise that for some this is the most natural process and for others it can be contrived and artificial. We hope that our approach is helpful and facilitates your thinking about the process of reflection as much as about the themes of that reflection.

We are not academically or professionally neutral; we strongly believe that the dominant themes informing educational leadership are to do with the key issue of equity in all its various permutations. This directly influences our choice of themes and resources, although we believe that almost all of the book is relevant to a range of contexts and systems.

The following questions, themes and topics underpin the eight chapters in this book:

### 1. Why leadership?

- Understanding the origins of prevailing models of leadership.
- Recognising the problems with certain approaches to leadership in education.
- Justifying the models of leadership prevalent in schools.
- Developing a common language to enable shared understanding of effective leadership.

### 2. Creating a preferred future – leading change

What is the evidence that your leadership has a strategic perspective?

- Creating a culture of aspiration and hope.
- Moving from improving to transforming.
- Developing strategic conversations.

- Building preferred scenarios.
- Leading change and innovation.

### 3. Leadership as a moral activity

How does your leadership create a culture and practice based on shared values?

- Building a moral consensus focused on securing equity.
- Working through authenticity and integrity.
- Considering how successful leaders make decisions.
- Focusing on 'doing the right things' as a leader.
- Holding colleagues to account.

### 4. Learning as the core purpose of school leadership

What do leaders do to secure effective learning for all?

- Embedding the principles of effective learning.
- Realising potential through personalisation.
- Focusing on teaching to close the gap.
- Enabling progress in learning and so achievement for all.
- Emphasising evidence and data-based teaching and learning.

### 5. Leading through collaboration and cooperation

How far is leadership based on cooperation and collaboration?

- Moving from autonomy to collaborative working – bonding to bridging.
- Developing social capital.
- Looking at leadership beyond the school – across the system.
- Focusing on intervention to prevent failure.

## 6. Building capacity – sharing leadership

Is leadership about personal status or collective capacity?

- Moving from dependency to interdependency.
- Building a culture of trust and empowerment.
- Progressing from distributed to shared leadership.
- Securing leadership capacity and sustainability.

## 7. Leading through relationships

In what ways does leadership work through sophisticated personal relationships?

- Focusing on the rational–emotional continuum of leadership.
- Understanding leadership through love and power.
- Leading through trust and empathy.
- Encouraging a commitment to care and compassion.
- Developing emotional literacy.

## 8. Leadership and personal resilience

How is effective leadership nurtured and sustained?

- Fostering strategies for personal growth and development.
- Developing personal well-being – ‘reservoirs of hope’.
- Advocating resilience and sustainability.



## Chapter 1

# Why leadership?

There seems to be a broad consensus across educational systems that leadership is a key variable in educational improvement. There is less consensus as to the exact nature of successful leadership and the direction that leadership in education might take. This chapter explores the following issues:

- Why is there such an emphasis on leadership?
- What are the origins of the prevailing models of leadership in education?
- What are the problems and issues with certain approaches to leadership in education?
- Can we justify the prevailing models of leadership found in schools?
- Is there a common language to enable a shared understanding of effective leadership?

## The problem with leadership

There seems little doubt that leadership is a highly significant factor in explaining the success or otherwise of a school or indeed any human social enterprise. Leadership has always been a vital element in any school improvement strategy, and all the research evidence points to certain types of leadership behaviour as being essential to turning schools

around. Indeed, it would seem that there is an overwhelming consensus not just about the importance of leadership but also about the specific components of that leadership:

A large number of quantitative studies ... show that school leadership influences performance more than any other variable except socio-economic background and the quality of teaching. (Barber et al. 2010: 5)

This assertion has, of course, to be qualified from a number of perspectives: the historical context and prevailing culture of the school, the leadership styles and strategies adopted and, crucially in a high stakes accountability model, the relative impact of the leader.

What is very clear is that there is an increasing focus on what might be described as a 'managerial perspective' in government, across the public sector and in education. This is reflected in neoliberal stances on the importance of competition, the absence of central control, the emphasis on autonomy and the increasing stress on technical expertise as being more significant than any concept of community accountability or institutional or local democracy.

However, Pink (2008: 2) argues:

We are moving from an economy and a society built on the logical, linear, computerlike capabilities of the Information Age to an economy and a society built on the inventive, empathic, big-picture capabilities of what's rising in its place, the Conceptual Age.

If this is true, then it would seem to imply the need for a radical reconceptualisation of the prevailing models of leadership. But the history of the West has tended to stress the individuality of leadership and regard leadership as, in some way, intrinsically heroic. This has been reinforced, not least in schools, by a parallel culture of dependency (waiting to be saved by the hero) rather than the more complex and demanding concept of followership (accepting responsibility for co-creating a preferred future). It might be that one type of relationship between learner and teacher, essentially dependent, is a microcosm of the relationship between head teacher and staff. In order to respond to the challenges of living in a very different world, leadership may need to be understood as a process and a relationship rather than personal status and a reified position posited on degrees of significance and value:

our understanding of leadership needs to move beyond contemplation of isolated heroes and consider instead those who translate their ideas into action ... in order to understand how individual leaders and followers contribute to the leadership process we need to understand and explain how their psychologies are shaped and transformed by their engagement in shared group activity. (Haslam et al. 2011: 17)

The crucial point here is that leadership is derived from significant relationships – that is, leadership is a function of the social and emotional dynamics of the group. It is not so much a matter of the leader taking control of the group but rather understanding the emotional climate of which they have become a part. The reality is, of course, that leadership is a fundamentally contested concept. It is a fuzzy and highly complex set of interconnected propositions that are not amenable to a technical-rational interpretation. The leader as technician is as potentially dangerous as the leader as hero. Clearly, there needs to be a balance between leadership as a set of technical skills and leadership as an art rooted in relationships, imagination and moral purpose.

Is the Anglophone world in thrall to the idea of the hero-leader?

Is this a cultural issue or a manifestation of a dependency culture?

Do we still believe that charisma is a helpful concept in talking about leadership in education?

What are the implications of the move towards academisation and increased collaboration for our understanding of effective leadership?

Can leadership be reduced to a set of technical skills?

In their study of the potential implications of the development of various types of technology on the nature, status and work of professionals, Susskind and Susskind (2015: 32) identify a number of key questions:

1. Might there be entirely new ways of organising professional work that are more affordable, more accessible and perhaps more conducive to an increase in quality than traditional approaches?
2. Does it follow that *all* the work that our professionals currently do can only be undertaken by licensed experts?

3. To what extent do we actually trust professionals to admit that their services could be delivered differently?
4. Are our professions fit for purpose? Are they serving our societies well?

If the word 'professional' is replaced with 'leaders' then a powerful and potentially challenging critique begins to emerge. This critique is powerfully expressed in the conclusion of their analysis in which they see two possible ways forward:

One leads to a society in which practical expertise is a shared online resource, freely available and maintained in a collaborative spirit. The other route leads to a society in which this knowledge and experience may be available online, but is owned and controlled by providers. (Susskind and Susskind 2015: 307)

This is the essential dilemma about the nature of leadership: is it to be seen as a collective capacity working through shared ownership and interdependency, or is it about control and the exercise of power? Brown (2014: 9) extends this critique of a world dominated by an essentially historical view of leadership:

'Strong' leadership is, then, generally taken to signify an individual concentrating power in his or her own hands and wielding it decisively. Yet the more power and authority is accumulated in just one leader's hands, the more that leader comes to believe in his or her unrivalled judgement and indispensability.

An important corollary of this, Brown argues, is that leaders are overwhelmed by the number of decisions they are required to take and so either delegate inappropriately or make rushed decisions on the basis of inadequate evidence. Strong leaders are often guilty of the rationalistic fallacy – the belief that the world is controllable, predictable and essentially linear. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Leadership is messy and swampy and the idea that effective leaders can occupy the high ground and actually control their world is part of the mythology of strong leadership.

Brown goes on to make the case for moving away from the emphasis on the leader to recognising that they 'must be able to appeal to emotion, sharing in the sense of identity of their party or group' (Brown 2014: 61). This is about much more than building effective teams, working through



consensus or developing quality relationships. Rather, it is about moving away from focusing on the leader and questioning the very concept of the leader-centric organisation. For Haslam et al. (2011: 17) leadership is too often seen:

as a noun rather than as a verb, something that leaders possess rather than as a process in which they are participants ... leader-centricity tends to obscure, if not completely overlook, the role that followers play.

An interesting example of the cultural implications of a leader-centricity is the way in which orchestral conductors are perceived. The most famous (but not all) seem to be characterised by a combination of supreme musicianship and massive egos. There is no doubt that individual conductors can make an enormous difference to a performance – the difference between a competent performance and a life-changing event. And yet orchestral musicians are extraordinarily technically accomplished; most, if not all, are capable of solo performances of the highest standard. So, is the conductor just another manifestation of the need to have a leader rather than explore different ways of working? Consider the following characteristics of the work of professional orchestral musicians:

- Recruitment to a great orchestra requires the highest possible combination of technical mastery and musicianship.
- Each section of the orchestra and the whole ensemble spend hours in rehearsal in addition to personal practice.
- Orchestras develop a unique 'voice' in terms of their approach to the orchestral repertoire and could perform many pieces irrespective of what the conductor might be doing.

It would be wrong to be overly naive or idealistic about the ability of highly accomplished musicians to be self-directing. It is doubtful if a Mahler symphony could be performed without strong central direction; likewise, the micro-politics of some trios and quartets can be feral at best.

This emphasis on the leader as an individual is expressed in a wide variety of ways, not least the widening gap between leaders and followers in terms of status, remuneration and rewards. The range of remuneration – the difference between the highest and lowest paid people in an organisation – provides an interesting insight into the values of that

organisation. It is often claimed that this gap is necessary and justified because of the increasing accountability that is focused on the individual and the competition to secure the most effective leaders. But this, of course, is a reinforcing factor that merely compounds the issue.

How can it be possible in any human enterprise, let alone a school, to identify and isolate the contribution of one individual to the exclusion of all others?

To what extent is your school leader centric?

Does your school's leadership subscribe to the rationalistic fallacy?

How is your perspective on the nature of successful leadership reflected in the way that your school functions?

How might information technology influence the future of the leadership of the teaching profession?

There is a possibility that the hero-leader in a leader-centric society might actually inhibit or distort democratic processes, innovation and cooperation. These concerns are exacerbated by issues surrounding the possibility of actually training or developing the relational dimensions of leadership:

We think that leadership can be taught – which, given the paucity of objective evidence, might be true or might not. We think that leadership can be learned quickly and easily ... We think leader-centrally – that being a leader is better and more important than being a follower. Wrong again. (Kellerman 2012: xx)

The discussion in this chapter is intended to apply to anyone who has a responsibility to provide leadership – in the classroom, for the team, for the school, trust or federation. There is a real danger in education that leadership is seen as essentially synonymous with headship and that other manifestations of leading in the school are essentially derivative or diluted versions of leadership.

A major issue at the outset of this discussion is that there are multiple alternative definitions and permutations of leadership (at least 25 in MacBeath's 2004 study) and it is possible to get totally bewildered in the semantics of the concept. It is essentially a Humpty Dumpty word – it means whatever we want it to mean.

Libby Nicholas and John West-Burnham examine the big questions facing leaders today, with an approach that is neither normative nor prescriptive but rather exploratory and developmental. Applying research and case studies from both inside and outside the educational canon, Libby and John challenge prevailing orthodoxies and invite readers to reflect on their personal understanding of leadership as the basis for translating theory into practice. All leadership behaviour is based on a number of fundamental personal assumptions about the nature of human relationships and the basis on which human organisations function. *Understanding Leadership* helps leaders make their implicit understanding explicit and so informs and aids the development of professional practice.

High performance, effective leadership is truly transformational. Libby and John believe that leadership cannot be taught; rather it has to be learnt. They argue that school leadership is primarily concerned with learning: the leader's own, and facilitating that of the children. Questioning, interrogating and analysing ideas and practice are fundamental to that learning process. This book will prompt leaders to do just that.

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*Understanding Leadership* provides the reader with a range of illuminating opportunities to seriously think and reflect on his or her effectiveness as a leader in responding to the fundamental challenges in schools today. The text is characterised by regular opportunities for personal review and a series of challenging, and sometimes provocative, questions. This is a must-read for any school leader operating within the current constantly changing educational landscape.

**Leanne Eyre, Director of Professional Learning, University of Chester Academies Trust**

This is a rich resource for leaders at all levels in educational settings. The authors use a range of national and international examples and include resources which are accessible and ready for practical application. The questions at the start of each chapter and the self-review at the end of each chapter will help to support individual reflection, as well as provide stimuli for teams and coaching conversations. The authors challenge traditional assumptions about leadership, management, social equity and collaboration. They provide evidence for readers to construct alternative perspectives with the emphasis on the core business of learning and leadership for the future.

**Carolyn Hughan, Director, ETC Teaching School Alliance**

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