

Overcoming barriers that stop new leaders from delivering change

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- Commonly held misconceptions about risk, new leaders' own capacity to effect change, and the role of collaborative networks can stymie innovation for public sector leaders.
- Better understanding risk and desired outcomes, and harnessing the power of collaborative networks, can help new leaders overcome these barriers.

The three paradoxes of leadership

Three paradoxes regularly stop new leaders from introducing change.¹

1. **The paradox of agency:** 'I can't change systems'.

New leaders often underestimate their opportunity to create change. But avoiding change reinforces the original assumption that change is not possible.

2. **The paradox of risk:** 'My current practice isn't risky so why take a risk'.

New leaders often perceive the risk of maintaining the status quo as inherently smaller than the risk of changing it. But labelling change efforts as risky then

increases the reputational risk for those involved in them

3. **The paradox of 'other people':** 'I don't want people to have a go at me'.

New leaders are more likely to notice the people who might to oppose change, than identify people who would support and help with it. Yet, not drawing upon people as a resource actually makes overcoming resistance harder.

The result of these paradoxes is that new leaders tend to 'lie low' instead of initiating change. Addressing these three leadership paradoxes is essential for leadership development.

What does research tell us about making change happen?

Noticing that one can change systems is key to leadership development. This is not as hard as one might think. Research consistently shows that when professionals try out a change project, they are positively surprised. Such opportunities help new leaders experience their own power.

To translate this sense of agency into real workplaces, leadership development must address **risk**. Research shows that risk often appears one-dimensional to new leaders: the greater the change, the greater the risk. The different aspects of risk are not visible:

- *When:* the risk of change is often seen as immediate, while the risk of the status quo is seen as in the future.

¹ Hofmann, R., & Vermunt, J.D. (2020). Professional learning, organisational change and clinical leadership development outcomes. *Medical Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.14343> (2020).

- *What*: For example in medical settings, prioritising patient care over capacity-building of junior doctors risks future capacity, while prioritising capacity-building may pose risks to patient care right now. Both contain risk.
- *Where/To whom*: The risk of change is perceived as personal/reputational whereas the risk of maintaining the status quo is often seen as organisational.²

Safely trying out a project and disentangling the different risks can help 'speed up' leadership development.

Another common challenge is that new leaders often think of **other people** as followers or barriers. Instead of asking what expertise exists within one's collaborative networks, new leaders worry about upsetting people, or failing to persuade opponents. Our research suggests that leaders in this position should consider the '4W's of other people' before thinking about the 'How': *Who*, *What*, *Why* and *When* can others help me get things done?

Ways forward for leadership development research and practice

Public sector leaders are typically expected to prevent risks. But risk-averse cultures can lead to under-ambitious change efforts. New leaders need opportunities to safely try out projects without full reputational risk. To translate

² Hofmann, R. (2020, in press). Dialogues with Data: Generating theoretical insights from research on practice in higher education. Tight & Huisman (Eds.). Theory and Method in Higher Education Research 6th Ed. Emerald.

to real workplace leadership, such projects should be:

- authentic: grounded in genuine organisational practice;
- significant: address a real organisational need;
- ambitious: have a significant potential to fail.

Public sector leadership can also be a lonely place, with limited opportunities to learn from other leaders. Leadership development should be conducted alongside a network of leaders. This would show that positive surprises are not an anomaly but happen across leaders and organisations. In multi-professional courses, this also helps overcome silos that often limit workplace innovation.

Putting people in the same room is a great start, but it is not enough. We cannot change the settings, risks, or people involved in their leadership efforts – but we can change the thinking *tools* they use to manage them. We need tools that enable participants to collaboratively analyse change processes. They should help participants analyse the roles of others and the dimensions of risk.³

The 4Ws tool referenced above is a good start, but there is scope for significant new research to develop evidence-based tools linked to genuine change in leadership practice. Such research should also examine futures-tools: tools to help new

³ Hofmann, R. (2016). Leading professional change through research(ing). In P. Burnard, T. Dragovic, J. Flutter and J. Alderton (Eds.). Transformative Professional Doctoral Research Practice. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

leaders envision desired future situations and pathways to them.

Ultimately, collaborative leadership networks should change too. We should evaluate leadership development through evidence of 'impact chains' – the people whom current leaders have gone on to influence and share their leadership tools with. The long-term benefit of this kind of knock-on effect is clear.

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