

## Relational leadership: public sector leaders into the next decade

Jackie Ford, Durham University Business School

---

- We need a shift from traditional leader-centric thinking to collaborative and relational leadership.
- Leading complex change means rebalancing the tension between business-driven and people-focussed priorities.
- Re-thinking leadership requires more inclusive, ethical, eclectic, and contextually meaningful forms of working.

### The trouble with leadership

---

Many contemporary leadership studies and practices remain focussed on hierarchical and traditional forms of leadership. This gives undue focus to the senior leader as organisational hero, romanticising their influence and neglecting other parties and contexts crucial to leadership. This marginalises those being led and overlooks the social and cultural contexts within which this leadership relationship occurs.

Such practices also fix leaders and followers in one assumed identity and tend to presume leaders and followers are separate and homogenous categories. However, followers and leaders have many characteristics and identities. Depending on context, individuals may, at different times, be depicted as both leader and follower. This makes both the theory

and the practice of these roles more complex.

This is a major omission and poses particular problems in the UK public sector, especially at a time of unprecedented challenges presented by the coronavirus crisis and the environment of radical uncertainty. These problems, as well as suggestions on the implications for future public service leaders, are explored below.

### New relational approaches

---

Leading complex change requires carefully managing the constant tension between business-driven and people-focussed priorities. Circumstances frequently favour the former over the latter. But evidence demonstrates time and again that when leaders invest their energies in working with their colleagues, they are much more likely to make progress in a spirit of collaboration and teamwork. One approach to encourage this is to use feedback discussions to engage in constructive, two-way conversations. These can be effective at enabling reflexive dialogue, examining and building relationships within management and leadership processes (Ford et al, 2008)<sup>1</sup>. The '360 degree narrative approach' is a technique which can help with this.<sup>2</sup> This approach provides a framework for using

---

<sup>1</sup> Ford, J Harding, N & Learmonth, M (2008)

*Leadership as Identity: Constructions and deconstructions*, London: Palgrave Macmillan

<sup>2</sup> This is an approach to developmental feedback, founded on qualitative research theory and methods. It relies on dialogue between those giving and receiving feedback, based on individual reflection, leading to shared understandings and recognition and value placed on differences of interpretation, of management and leadership.

dialogue between those giving and receiving feedback, allowing individuals to reflect on and discuss their unique strengths and development needs, but also to create a shared understanding of leadership and management and more distributive models of power in the workplace.

Actively encouraging reflection and dialogue between leaders and followers enables leaders to become more aware of how they constitute, maintain and thereby retain some power and control over their working lives and identities. Engagement in a critical, relational and reflexive two-way conversation encourages managers and their staff alike to critique and question their own experiences.

My research in organisations over the last three decades points to the importance of such relational leadership approaches. These approaches recognise the significance of interpersonal relationships and the powerful effect of successful interactions between leaders and led.

Each individual, whether in their role as leader or follower, will experience leadership differently. Given the asymmetry of the relationship, those in leadership roles must recognise and empathise with the needs, feelings, circumstances, and history of those they lead. Relational leaders need to be responsive, responsible and accountable to others in everyday interactions.

It also behoves followers to claim their voice and value the contribution they make to the leader-led relationship. Too often, we hear of followers feeling unable

to speak or be recognised, thereby denying their sense of self and what they can contribute. When working in a follower role, actively speaking up and speaking out is crucial.

### **Re-thinking leadership**

---

Leadership is best viewed as the collective and relational work of many people in an organisation. We therefore need understandings of leadership that are more inclusive, ethical, eclectic and contextually meaningful. We need to develop a language that can challenge prevailing assumptions and structures of privilege.

Leadership should be something that improves interactions between managers, professional staff, knowledge workers and all employees. It should improve the quality of working life in general.

Rather than being constrained by rigid leadership theories and models, we should seek interpersonal approaches that improve interactions between people at work, recognise the local setting in which the work takes place, and embrace the unique relationships that people build together. Only by doing so will it be possible to harness the combined intelligence of the workforce, and build relationships within, across and beyond the organisation.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Ford, J. (2019) 'Rethinking relational leadership: recognising the mutual dynamic between leaders and led,' in Carroll, B., Wilson, S. and Firth, J., *After Leadership*, London: Routledge, pp 157-174.

**Leaders seeking to adopt a more relational approach should consider taking the following steps:**

- Recognise the complex and multiple roles and relationships you and others adopt in organisational life which create ambiguity and unequal power relations
- Rather than top-down leadership edicts, leaders are encouraged to create space for multiple, inclusive, meaningful and equal voices amongst colleagues
- Create an environment in which you encourage constructive debate and exchange in your work groups
- Embrace regular conversations between leaders, followers, peers and others which engage with the day to day experiences of staff and enable all colleagues to make their contributions to the organisation
- Take time for regular get-togethers with your work teams and continue to reflect on ways in which to recognise the contribution of all staff

**Leaders of the future**

---

This also has implications for how we seek to develop leaders and suggests the need for education and learning that embraces collaboration, relationship-building and teamworking.<sup>4</sup>

Effective public sector leaders need to recognise the social capital of their workforce to realise its full potential. We

need leadership that is politically aware, collaboratively-focussed, socially concerned and ready to tackle the social, economic, technological and political uncertainties of the future.

**Jackie Ford** is Professor of Leadership and Organisation Studies at Durham University Business School. Her research includes the study of working lives, notably in exploring critical approaches to leadership; gender, diversity and inclusion; ethics, management and organisation studies.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ford, J (2015) 'Going beyond the hero in leadership development: the place of healthcare context, complexity and relationships', *Int J Healthcare Policy Making*, 4: 261-263.