

## Engaging and developing public sector leaders

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- There is limited evidence to demonstrate that investment in leadership development has improved public sector leadership.
- Leaders are too often developed in isolation away from their organisational context.
- A social learning approach to leadership may help facilitate more effective leadership.

### Background

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High quality leadership is generally accepted as a crucial element of effective organisations. Every year millions of pounds are spent finding and developing the best leaders.

But here's the problem – there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that this investment has been effective. There is also little evidence to suggest that leadership development leads to more effective leadership. Many public sector organisations still report leadership as weak.

A reason might be that we are thinking about leadership in the wrong way.

Leaders have often been seen as heroic individuals with super skills, swooping in and doing a range of things to organisations. And we have often developed them in this way: as special individuals away from their organisational contexts.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Peck, E. and H. Dickinson (2009), [Performing leadership](#).

The reality is that although individuals are important in thinking about leadership, by just focusing on leaders we miss the wider picture.

So how can we think about leadership differently, so our expectations and investment match reality better?

### The changing nature of leadership

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Many areas of government have gone through significant changes in terms of what they do and how they work.

Public sector organisations have shifted from being predominantly deliverers of services to systems steward-type roles. The advancement of digital technologies also means that the ways that these organisations operate has changed. So has their workforce, with a rise in part time working and increasing diversity across a number of dimensions.

These changes mean that the competencies and skills that leaders need to perform their roles have shifted. It follows that the ways we develop and recruit public sector leaders also need to change.

### Social learning and leadership

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In this new leadership environment, 'soft skills' are important. These are things like interpersonal qualities, people skills, the ability to communicate well and so on. However, human resource practices have not always focused on how these can be acquired and developed. Systems have often tended to remain focused on 'harder' skills that are easier to identify and quantify.

Leadership development programmes have focused on different forms of learning as a way of encouraging deeper and more long lasting knowledge development. For example, the 70:20:10 model sees individuals gain 70% of knowledge from job-related experience, 20% from interactions with others, and 10% from formal education.<sup>2</sup> However, the experiential component is often not well supported.

By drawing on social learning theory, we can rethink the way we approach leadership development. Such an approach recognises the development of individual capabilities and capacities as important. But it also pays attention to the contexts they will be deployed in to ensure that they can be acted on.

Bandura<sup>3</sup> argues that for adults to learn and adopt new behaviours, they must progress through a complex process that consists of four distinct elements:

- Attentional – observing role models who exemplify desired behaviours;
- Retention – processing and recalling behaviours for future use;
- Motor-reproduction – mastering behaviours through practice, self-correcting activities and constructive feedback;
- Motivational – identifying clear benefits from adopting certain behaviours to motivate ongoing practice and eventual mastery.

These four elements of social learning can serve as a framework, supported by

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<sup>2</sup> Blackman, D. et al (2016), 'The 70:20:10 model for learning and development: An effective model for capability development?' Academy of Management Meeting August 5-9<sup>th</sup>, Anaheim.

<sup>3</sup> Bandura, A. (1986), '[Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory](#)'.

guidelines and practices, for building workplace capability and supporting change.

Where human resource processes are designed around development processes that actively address each element, they are likely to be more effective.

## Reconceptualising leadership

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Within each of these four categories there are a range of activities that might be undertaken to improve leadership engagement and development.

For attentional elements, what this tells us is that people identify appropriate and inappropriate behaviours (and learn the apparently acceptable rules of behaviour) from watching the people they interact with regularly. This is why 'walking the talk' is so important.

Identifying individuals who are best placed to model behaviours and working with them can be a good way to accentuate certain sorts of leadership. In terms of engagement, modelling these behaviours through social media can be a good way to express the types of approaches valued. This also implies a change in recruitment, away from valuing only formal qualifications, towards asking candidates to articulate how their behaviours align with those modelled.

Role modelling alone, however, is not enough to change practice. These behaviours and skills need to be explicitly supported and rewarded. Development approaches therefore need to incorporate a degree of experiential learning – trial and error – if they are to be effective. Individuals need to be actively worked with as they understand how to be a consistent role

model, integrate new skills into their work, and support peers and team members integrate new skills.

In refining behaviours it is important that environments tolerate error and provide regular, constructive or corrective feedback. Leaders all too often do not receive feedback as colleagues are not asked, or are too scared, to give it frankly. Finding ways to build this into local human resource practices is essential if individuals are to learn from their past practices and improve.

Done well, performance management can be a helpful tool to embed learning. For leaders working with teams it can be a helpful way of articulating expectations and rewarding certain forms of actions or behaviours.

Reorienting leadership development approaches so they focus on the development of key skills and behaviours, and reinforcing these through organisational practice, will enhance and improve the effectiveness of these approaches and the substantial investments made in these.

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