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International Journal of Public Sector Management (ISSN 0951-3558)

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#### Citation Details

##### Citation for the version of the work held in 'OpenAIR@RGU':

SPICKER, P., 2012. "Leadership": a perniciously vague concept. Available from *OpenAIR@RGU*. [online]. Available from: <http://openair.rgu.ac.uk>

##### Citation for the publisher's version:

SPICKER, P., 2012. "Leadership": a perniciously vague concept. *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 25 (1), pp. 34-47

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# “Leadership”: a perniciously vague concept

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International Journal of Public Sector Management, 2012, 25(1) 34-47

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**Abstract Purpose.** *Despite the vast amount of literature covering the concept of leadership, it remains contentious, under-conceptualised and often uncritical. This paper questions the validity of the concept and disputes its application.*

**Design/methodology/approach.** *The paper reviews what the idea of leadership means, how it relates to competing accounts of management in the public services, and what value it adds.*

**Findings.** *There is no evident reason why the supposed roles, tasks, or qualities of “leadership” either need to be or should be concentrated in the person of a leader; the tasks involved in “leading” an organisation are not in fact the tasks of motivation, influence or direction of others which are at the core of the literature; and there is no reason to suppose that leadership is a primary influence on the behaviour of most organisations.*

**Practical implications.** *In the context of the public services, there is no set of skills, behaviours or roles which could be applied across the public services; the emphasis in leadership theory on personal relationships may be inconsistent with the objectives and character of the service; and the arrogation to a public service manager of a leadership role may be illegitimate.*

**Originality/value.** *The argument here represents a fundamental challenge to the concept of leadership, its relevance and its application to public services.*

A belief in “leadership” is at the core of a set of views about how organisations should run, and how people in organisations should behave. Although the idea has been circulating in academic currency for many years, its current influence in the public services reflects a

mushroom growth in the late 1990s. Hardly considered in the UK in the earlier part of that decade, it became one of the focal concepts of the New Labour government, featuring in over 70 documents on health policy between 1998 and 2001 (Peck, Dickinson, 2008, p 14). Since then the idea has mushroomed, becoming a staple part of the language in which management is discussed in health, education and local government. This paper reviews what the idea of leadership means, how it relates to competing accounts of management in the public services, and what value it adds.

### **The problem of definition**

There are many ambiguities in the concept of leadership itself - what it refers to, what it is, and what it involves (Bass, 1990; Wright, 1996; Northouse, 2007). There are so many definitions and models that it is impossible to state them all in a paper; all I can do is to summarise the main general classes of definition, rather than the specific meanings.

The classes of definition include these:

- *Motivation and influence.* One of the dominant understandings of leadership in the literature is the idea that a leader is someone who motivates and influences other people. “Most definitions of leadership”, Yukl suggests, “reflect the assumption that it involves a process whereby intentional influence is exerted over people to guide, structure and facilitates activities and relationships in a group or organization.” (Yukl, 2010, p.21)  
Leadership has been described, for example, as “a process of influencing the activities of an individual or group in efforts toward accomplishing goals in a given situation.” (Hersey, Blanchard, 1981; cf Northouse, 2007, p 3)  
This is associated with an understanding of leadership as a set of skills or approaches for exercising influence.
- *Leadership as a set of personal attributes or traits.* Within the broad understanding of leadership as someone who motivates or influences

others, it is possible to start understanding leadership as the characteristics of the leader - the sort of person who is able to do what leaders do. This might include for example the idea that leaders should have charisma (criticised in Morris et al, 2005), emotional intelligence (Smollan, 2006), enthusiasm, toughness, fairness, warmth, confidence (all in Thomas, 1998, p 120), dedication, magnanimity, creativity, openness (Bennis, 1989), humility, integrity (both in Thomas 1998 and Bennis 1989), or the ability to sell things (the last being “an important component of the Girl Scout Leadership Experience for girls”: Girl Scout Movement, n.d.). Stogdill’s list of traits seems endless, but he summarises the main categories as being concerned with capacity, achievement, responsibility, participation, status and situation (Bass, 1990, chs 4,5) Grint comments that he gave up trying to list the attributes of leaders in the literature when he got to 127 of them (Grint, 1997, p 3).

- *Leadership as management.* Many writers claim that leadership refers to something quite different from management. Management is said to be about the status quo, leadership is about change (Kotter, 1990). Leaders take risks which managers avoid (Zaleznik, 1992). Leadership deals with wicked problems, while management deals with tame problems (Grint, 2005). “Management is about implementation, order, efficiency and effectiveness, whereas leadership is concerned with future direction in uncertain conditions.” (Hafford-Letchfield et al, 2008, p 34)

Alvesson and Sveningsson are cutting about these claims; there is, they argue, a disconnection between the discourse about leadership and what the putative leaders do in practice (Alvesson, Sveningsson, 2003a). The supposed distinction between leadership and management misrepresents the literature on management, which, Mintzberg wrote over thirty years ago, “has always recognised the leader role, particularly those aspects of it related to motivation.” Mintzberg characterises management roles as including formal

authority, interpersonal roles, informational roles and decision roles: the interpersonal roles include the role of figurehead, leader and liaison (Mintzberg, 1975, p 305). Even if we accept that leadership is the more exciting, more adventurous, hotter younger brother of management, leadership still requires people to be in a position to exercise those qualities, and effective management requires people to respond to and adapt to their circumstances. That implies that leadership can also be understood as management by a different name.

- *Leadership as a system of authority.* Leaders run things, but they run them differently. Much of the literature is concerned with the second part of that statement. For definitional purposes, though, the first part of that statement is just as important - that leaders run things. Leadership is a system of authority identified with running an organisation, being in charge or carrying responsibility for a collective function or team. It can be exercised by an individual or distributed across a group (Day, Gronn, Salas, 2004). The idea of 'strategic leadership', for example, "focuses on the people who have overall responsibility for the organization and includes not only the titular head of the organization but also members of what is referred to as the management team or the dominant coalition" (Boal, Hooijberg, 2000, 516). Leadership is done by those in charge, or at least by those who take charge.

A situational view of leadership identifies the role as one where the leader has tasks to perform and has to adapt to different settings. "In effect", Grint writes, "the leader's actions and behaviour change to suit the situation". (Grint, 2000, p 3) Within that model, any characteristics, traits or skills that might be identified with leadership have to be seen in the context of the leader's relationships. There is a literature in social psychology which argues that the structural relationship of leaders within groups generates a social identity - a set of attributions, expectations and roles derived from the relationship of leader to follower (Hogg, 2001) This can be associated

with personal characteristics, but its source is the structural relationship, rather than the character of the individual leader.

- *Leadership as a relationship with subordinates.* Many understandings of leadership rely on the idea that leaders have followers (Baker, 2007). Leadership can be seen as a relationship where the task of the leader or leaders is to shape the behaviour of others - to get them to work in certain patterns, or to produce certain results. Leadership might be defined, then, in terms of the structural relationships within a group. The best example of leadership as a set of social relationships is probably the “constitutive” view of leadership, which interprets leadership as the product of a set of relations and a discourse within a social setting (Grint, 1997; Grint, 2000). Leadership is constructed or negotiated in terms of the relationship that a leader or leadership group has to other people, in a specific context.
- *Leadership as a set of roles.* A leader might be someone who acts as a pioneer, working in a different pattern as an example to others. It might be someone who defines a framework for others to work in. It might be someone who establishes a set of values or a culture. In social services the idea of leadership is also used to mean strategic planning, the coordination of teamwork and responsibility for achieving goals.

A focus on multiple roles, rather than the defining characteristics or position of the leader, opens the possibility for a more flexible concept of leadership. A group or network, rather than an individual, could exercise such roles (Day, Gronn, Salas, 2004). The roles could be shared, or distributed across a team. None of these roles presumes a particular set of attributes, or hierarchical authority. The distribution of leadership across a wide range of activities suggests that anyone can exercise leadership, in any position. To a growing number of commentators, “(1) leadership is not just a top-down process between the formal leader and team members; and

(2) there can be multiple leaders within a group". (Mehra et al, 2006)

The sets of meanings are indistinct. The definition of many complex concepts is based not on a unifying set of common features, but on a broader chain or "family resemblance." The term comes from Wittgenstein, who uses the illustration of a "game" to show how one set of meanings (puzzles, playful contexts) merges into another (sport) which merges into others (hunting and hunted animals) (Wittgenstein, 1958). It is not unreasonable for "leadership" to mean many things, and we should not expect it to have a common, unifying core of meaning.

This does, however, lead to a problem with the literature, because many of those writing about leadership are eager to assert that theirs is the one true definition. Some of the literature on leadership is inspirational writing, descended in direct line from Norman Vincent Peale or Dale Carnegie: compare the style of the "Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership" (Kouzes, Posner, 2003) or the "Four Lessons of Self Knowledge" (Bennis, 2003, p 50).. Writing on leadership can read like a religious tract:

"The transformational leader helps group members understand the need for change both emotionally and intellectually ... This model attempts to integrate the multiple dimensions and requirements of leadership - the cognitive, spiritual, emotional and behavioural." (Gill, 2003)

Writers on leadership tend to make confident statements about leadership - that leaders manage change, that leaders have followers, that leaders motivate - which are consistent with some parts of the constellation of meaning, but are not necessarily consistent with others.

The fervour of the cult of leadership makes it difficult to analyse the concept critically. It is hard to falsify propositions, because empirical evidence about one concept or understanding of leadership is not necessarily germane or relevant to other parts. A statement as anodyne as "a leader motivates others to achieve objectives" might be a prescription; it might be

tautologous (someone who does this is called a leader); it may be beside the point (if a leader is someone who builds a team or facilitates partnership working, getting people to achieve objectives may not be what they are doing); and it may be false (someone who is effectively achieving organisational objectives may not be motivating staff at all). The ambiguous, contested definitions means that specific interpretations are always disputable; the claim to adaptability and generalised skills implies that no fixed application of a concept can capture the concept empirically. Alvesson and Sveningsson found that “managers ... have rather vague and contradictory notions about leadership” and that in practice leadership “dissolves: even as a discourse it is not carried through.” (Alvesson, Sveningsson, 2003b, 379) Any generalisations I make about “leadership” in the sections that follow have to be subject to the proviso that, with shifting definitions and understandings, there are always likely to be differences of view and exceptions.

#### **“Leadership” in the public services**

The application of the concept of leadership to public services prompts disquiet, at several levels. The first problem is the assumption that the skills, methods and behaviours which are appropriate to the private sector can be applied to public services management. The case for this position was made in the 1970s and 80s for management. The task of a manager, as described by Mintzberg, was to run an organisation (Mintzberg, 1975). If the task was understanding of how organisations ran, rather than specific knowledge of the work of the organisation itself, then a person could claim to be qualified for a position by virtue of understanding management. Equally, there is no difference in principle, the argument runs, between an agency which is publicly accountable and a commercial firm engaged on a sub-contract to meet a specific performance target.

The idea that management skills or techniques are transferable to the public services is contentious enough. The models that apply in the private sector assume certain conditions - for example, that it is possible to specialise in areas of strength, leaving less favourable



areas to competitors, or that there are choices to make about production and responsiveness to the market. Neither of these is likely to apply in the public services. There are good reasons not to apply techniques appropriate to profit maximisation - such as the pursuit of efficiency through specialised or selective service - to services which depend on universality (Spicker, 2009). The terms in which public services can respond to demand are often determined by legally enforceable entitlements or government targets. There are well-known problems in extending the generic techniques of 'management by objectives' to services that are dependent on process and relationships with service users: the methods lead to gaming and distortion in the character of the service. And some public services - like schools or hospitals - cannot be allowed to fail; a model of risk-taking, innovative leadership that courts the possibility of failure is not an option.

Extending the argument for generic transferability from 'management' to 'leadership' goes a step further. It moves the focus beyond functional roles or tasks (like competence in financial management) into broadly based attributes and skills (like the ability to motivate people). Most of the definitions of leadership focus on the interaction between the leader and the people being led, and the way the leader seeks to alter relationships through that interaction. Leadership is based, in these models, on developing, forming and managing personal relationships. Some workers in the public services have found this emphasis persuasive. Nursing, teaching and social work depend strongly on personal relationships and skills, and the belief that these skills can be extended to management has a clear appeal. This element is plausible, but it needs to be treated with caution. Managing change is often impersonal: it can happen, for example, through reforming organisational structures, altering budgetary priorities and changing policies for recruitment and retention (Boyne, Dahya, 2002). Motivating and inspiring people is not the only way to manage, and it is not invariably the best way; that depends on context and circumstances. If the idea of leadership is to be generically applicable, what is involved in leadership has to be identified and the relevance of its application needs to be demonstrated. It is questionable whether any set of skills, behaviours or personal attributes claimed for leadership meets that

standard. But it is possible to find - quite seriously - recommendations that leaders in the health service can learn from the example of Napoleon. (Milner, Joyce, 2005) Napoleon built his reputation on strategy, charisma, risk-taking and ruthlessness. One has to question whether this is really what someone needs to run a breast feeding clinic or an infection unit.

There are public services, like policing and social work, where officers are routinely required to manage risks and take the initiative - though arguably this applies more at street level than it does in middle management. But there are sometimes objectives in the public services which are inconsistent with an emphasis with the approaches associated with leadership. There are agencies where the objective is not to innovate, but to provide a consistent, reliable service, like school management or rubbish collection. A prime example is the stress on uniformity and consistency of standards which was a major element in income maintenance provision after 1948. The UK system of social security was developed deliberately within the structure of a hierarchical bureaucracy, based on a strict functional division of specified tasks. The actions of administrators would be governed by determinate rules rather than the judgment of those in power, as it had been during the Poor Laws. (Hill, 1969; Bradshaw, 1981). Another example is arguably the abhorrence of diversity in the health services. At the same time as officers and commentators have been stressing the joys of leadership, central government has been seeking to establish universal targets and common standards while minimising variation. It is not self-evident that the exercise of 'leadership' is desirable, appropriate or even permissible.

There are potential conflicts of interest here between political control and organisational culture. Leadership can be seen as an intensely political concept, related to the use of power and influence (Yukl, 2010, ch 7). Several of the key concepts of leadership - the emphasis on motivation, the development of skills and behaviours to engage and enthuse people, the acceptance of authority within networks - are plausible representations of relationships in the domain of politics (and arguably more plausible in that context than they

are in structured corporate organisations). In relation to government, the idea of leadership implies a distinctive role. When the New Labour government started to promote the idea of leadership, it was the model of political leadership, rather than leadership by public officials, that they had in mind. For example, the arguments for leadership in local communities put by the government assumed, unhesitatingly, that community leadership is the responsibility of the elected local authority; the institution of a directly elected leader was presented as a way to achieve that. (Cm 4298, 1999) In a democracy, the establishment of vision, objectives and strategies for the community is the role of politicians, accountable to the public.

Few senior officers in a central or local government department could remain unaware of the political environment in which they operate, and they can reasonably aspire to demonstrate the same skills and aptitudes as their political masters. However, that implies the potential for a conflict of leadership, with a tension between the position of politicians and officers in the establishment and setting of objectives. It is open to question whether the exercise of "leadership" by unelected officials is proper or legitimate. That issue is addressed directly by Behn and Cook (Behn, 1989; Cook, 1989). Both recognise the apparent conflict between the claims of executive officials to "lead" when legitimacy depends on elective office and (in the US) constitutional authority. Behn considers "what leaders do, and why it might be bad if public managers did all that." His answer is that managers have to be prepared to fill in the gaps: "leadership from public managers is necessary because the legislative branch of government gives public agencies missions that are vague and often fails to provide enough resources to pursue seriously all of these missions." (Behn, 1989, 209). Civil servants are supposed to make recommendations about policy, not to decide the policy themselves. Public managers in such a situation do not have the right to do what they see fit - that arrogates to officials rights and powers which belong to others, simply because they can. In principle, they should seek authority; but where there is a gap, it may be more appropriate for others - partners, professionals, citizens or service users - to fill it. I am more sympathetic to Cook's response to the same question as Behn; because public management is unavoidably political, managers need to be sensitive to the political

dimensions and implications of the work they are doing (Cook, 1989). That is not equivalent to saying that they must act in a leadership role; indeed, it may militate against it.

### Alternative accounts of organisational management

“Leadership” is not the only way to explain how organisations work or can be changed. There are several alternative paradigms. One is economic. It attempts to explain organisational processes, relationships and outcomes in terms of responses to economic incentives (for example, in principal-agent theory or rational choice: Lane, 2005). Like the idea of leadership, it might be taken to be descriptive, but fundamentally it is prescriptive, offering a set of recommendations about what should be done for certain outcomes to follow. I am not going to say more about incentives in this paper, except to point out that the model is genuinely an alternative explanation for organisational behaviour. Although incentives and leadership might be used in tandem, in so far as people are responding to prospective financial rewards, they are not responding to personal or motivational inputs, and vice versa.

A second paradigm is humanist. Much leadership theory depends on what sociologists call “agency”: the view that personal relationships matter, and that individuals can make a personal difference. Leadership is not the only way this position can be argued, however. Recognising that people need emotional sensitivity, communication or negotiation does not imply that this is something leaders should be expected to do - any more than the roles of the manager have to be exercised all by the same person. It may happen, for example, that the primary networking and communication in an organisation is done by the person with whom people most come into contact - who might be a secretary or receptionist. Team building, too, is widely understood in terms of people working in complementary roles: creativity, negotiation or communication are not necessarily leadership roles, and indeed the literature on team development suggests they should be distributed within the team rather than centred in a leadership role (Belbin, 2004; Senior, 1998). Similar relationships could be developed by diffusing aspects of leadership, like motivation, innovation and building networks, across an organisation (e.g. Boal, Hooijberg, 2000; Day, Gronn, Salas, 2004)

- though it is debatable whether, in that process, the idea of 'leadership' is adding anything to the mix. It does not follow, because organisations rely to some extent on personal relationships, that this is dependent on leadership, or attributable to it.

The third explanatory paradigm is based on social and cultural explanations of organisational behaviour. Organisational behaviour is seen as a reflection of the social circumstances in which it occurs: responses to hierarchy, authority, direction and communication are socially conditioned. Pfeffer argues that people's motivation can depend on their demographic relationship or geographical location (Pfeffer, 1991).

Any of these approaches could be combined with a model of leadership, each making some contribution to processes and outcomes. There is also however a further approach which leaves little room for the role of a "leader": understandings based on the structure and systemic relationships within the organisation itself. This fourth paradigm is institutional. The structure of an organisation shapes the reactions of people within it. It affects who they come into contact with, how they interact, and how those interactions are interpreted. There is a wide range of factors which might reasonably be held, not just to affect the ability of a leader to influence, motivate or direct others, but to produce patterns of behaviour in themselves. The most obvious is the structure of authority - the pattern of accountability and the framework of relationships in which interactions take place. Command structures, bureaucracies, professional organisations, corporate and agency relationships are different, and each implies a different set of roles for any supposed "leader". Further limitations reflect the nature of the task the organisation performs. Organisations work differently if, for example, they have to respond to individual circumstances, if they are geographically decentralised, their task is rule-based (like income maintenance) or responsive to changing circumstances (like policing). Practice, too, shapes organisational culture. The literature on street level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980) and service ideologies (Smith, 1980; Spicker, 1987) marks how agencies adapt their patterns of work to practical realities. Housing services, for example, have come to emphasise equity because of the combination of pressure from service users with the scarcity of resources; in social work, the most serious problems relate to critical incidents in child abuse, enforced by the courts and a series of

public inquiries, and the dominant professional consideration is risk.

The context in which the service operates is also important. Services are influenced, and often shaped by, the financial environment, and its implications for resource use; the application of external principles (human rights, equalities, health and safety, data protection) and the extent to which services are subject to influence from other agencies (governments, the courts, partners in community planning). It is hard not to be aware of the political dimensions of operation in public services, government and the public sector. Equally, one of the key tasks of people in positions of nominal leadership - the role of a director or chief executive - is to communicate and coordinate the work of the organisation with others. Mintzberg comments on “the finding of virtually every study of managerial work that managers spend as much time with peers and other people outside their units as they do with their own subordinates.” (Mintzberg, 1975, p 305) This is a crucial objection to the very idea of “leadership” as it features in much of the literature. The people who usually designated as the leaders of an organisation are not primarily concerned with the issues of motivation and influence that are seen as central to leadership. Those issues, by contrast, depend substantially on delegated authority. The idea that the role of a “leader” is focused on the internal workings of the organisation is open to question, and may not be applicable at all.

The classes of explanation considered here - economic, humanistic, social, institutional and leadership-based - are competing explanations, not in the sense that they cannot co-exist, but rather in the sense that the greater the influence of one set of factors, the less appropriate it is to attribute the reasons for the same behaviour to another set. If the alternative accounts are true, or even partly true, they imply a diversity of structures and conditions. That undermines the basis for the argument that leadership or management roles can usefully be conceptualised or applied generically.

**“Effective” leadership in the public services**

There seems to be a sense in much of the literature, that whatever the context, and whatever the framework, encouraging leadership, training people to be leaders and developing the skills of leadership are bound to improve their effectiveness. “Effectiveness” is generally understood, Yukl argues, in one of four senses: the attainment of organizational goals, the perception and attitudes of followers, the leader’s contribution to the quality of group processes, and the career path of the leader. (Yukl, 2010, p 28) In the context of the public services, the most important of these is the first: public services exist, in principle, to meet the purposes of public policy (Spicker, 2009). While it may be helpful to have improved organizational relationships and enhanced career paths, they are not central to the purpose of such services.

In empirical terms, the evidence that leaders have any predictable or direct effect on performance or outcomes is weak and disputable (Thomas, 1988; Yukl, 2010). Case studies, examples and reviews of evidence tend to “read back” leadership into the consequences of actions, so that valued outcomes are attributed to successful leadership, and conversely failures are marked down to inadequate leadership (Grint, 1997). Yukl examines some hypotheses that can at least be related to public service work:

- the most effective pattern of decision making depends on the type of decision and quality of information available (2010, pp 140-6)
- supportive leadership can help workers “when the task is stressful, boring, tedious or dangerous” (2010, p 170)
- leaders can respond to deficiencies and obstacles to performance by modifying the situation or constraints on workers. (2010, pp 184-6)

The best supported hypothesis is the first - but it is really about decision making, not about ‘leadership’. Overall, the results are mainly inconclusive - there are too many factors and variables for effects to be clearly established. (Yukl, 2010, p. 190)

If the general evidence about the effectiveness of leadership is thin, in relation to government and the public services it is thinner still. One of the methods used in studies to test the effect that leadership might have is the effect of leadership succession. Boyne does find that

changing the chief executive of a public organisation has a small but significant effect. But he also notes that this might equally be a sign of the fact that changes in personnel are used to bring about changes in policy, or that “outsiders are more likely to implement strategic changes” (Boyne, Dahya, 2002, p 9). It is unclear that it shows any influence attributable to leadership, in any of the senses considered at the start of this paper.

In conceptual terms, the weakness of the evidence is only to be expected. Leadership is supposed to affect and influence issues like personal contact, negotiation, communications, motivation and engagement; but it is not the only factor within organisations that might have that effect. Personal contact and communications are affected not just by policy, but by role, function, professional activity and physical resources. People’s behaviours are conditioned by their training, their experience and the conditions they work in. Motivation and engagement are affected not just by leaders, but by colleagues, the character of the work, its purpose - one of the key elements in the literature on public services is the “public service ethos” - the conditions of work, salary, and so on. That list could be extended much further. The degree to which actors in the organisation exercise agency is subject to internal and external influence and constraints - especially in the public sector. The way an organisation is run, the role of people within that, and the potential for the exercise of leadership are only part of a constellation of factors. In its way, the claim that leadership changes motivation in organisations is as sweeping and implausible as the idea that incentives to work are all to do with money - and as it happens, these reductionist positions contradict each other. Leadership, incentives, structure, professional training and so on all have to be seen as contributory factors, rather than determinants. Leadership might have a positive effect; it might have a negative effect (Gemmill and Oakley suggest that overemphasising leadership could make subordinates less likely to accept responsibility: 1997, p 281); it might tip the balance. However, whether leadership is ever a sufficient factor in itself to bring about change must depend on the context. Leadership theories marginalise the relevance of many of the characteristic features of public services - the political nature of decisions (Bozeman, Breitschneider, 1994), the complex patterns of accountability, the influence of external organisations, or the reliance for motivation on the public sector ethos (Boyne,



2002). These are much more than supplementary considerations. The arguments for leadership seem to suggest that the leaders will work their magic as long as these things are taken to be equal, but they never are.

### The idea of leadership

The idea of leadership is highly prescriptive: it offers a set of instructions on how things can be done. In much of the literature, leadership is a virtue - a set of features, characteristics or behaviours that are generally approved of, even if the outcomes may not be. "The manager does things right", Bennis writes, "the leader does the right thing." (Bennis, 2003, p 40) Charisma, and the ability to persuade, influence and motivate are presented as the means to effective leadership, generally regardless of circumstances. Leaders are people who cope when others don't. "I tend to think of the differences between leaders and managers", Bennis writes, "as the differences between those who master the context and those who surrender to it." (Bennis, 2003, p 39) It is hard to imagine that many managers will identify themselves as falling into the second group - and equally hard to believe that this tells us anything useful about them.

There is a disturbing side-effect of the uncritical acceptance of the idea of leadership: its potential to justify and validate bad practice. Some prescriptive elements of the idea of leadership make, Pettigrew comments, "a direct appeal to the vanity of corporate leaders." (Pettigrew, 1987) The assertion that leaders need to be persistent, decision makers, to be passionate, to take prudent risks, to be a driving force, to be determined or to motivate people, and formulas like "telling, selling, supporting and delegating" (Hersey, Blanchard, 1981) miss out many of the fundamentals of good practice - like awareness of the context and mode of operation of an organization, listening to concerns, or attention to detail. The Chair of the Learning Skills Council recently explained his refusal to resign after failure to oversee a substantial deficit on capital expenditure with the comment that the organisation needed his "strong leadership" (Northam, 2009). The Chief Executive of the National Health Service declared that "I think we have the best leadership group that we've ever had.

... Almost everybody in this room has gone through some sort of process to check their capacity to take these leadership positions." (Santry, 2008) The same leadership group made a series of misjudgements relating to the NHS computer system (Daily Telegraph, 2007). Leadership qualities are all very well, but they don't compensate for bad decisions or a weak grasp of practical constraints. These examples are indicative of a wider problem. The disturbing failures of the Child Support Agency were able to build on "the Inspirational Leadership events that were conducted in the first year of the Operational Improvement Plan." (DWP, 2008). While Ofsted, the English educational inspectorate, was lambasting Children's Services in Haringey for lack of coordination, poor management, inconsistent practice and poor data, (Ofsted, 2008) the Director of Children's Services emphasised what a good leader she was: "I was in a leadership role ... had those skills, and had demonstrated them successfully." (Shoesmith, 2009) I have no reason to disbelieve these people's claims to the personal qualities of leadership: after all, they were selected for their role on that basis, and often there are people within the agencies who will support their claim to have them. It is clear, however, that even if they did have those qualities, their leadership role did not protect their agencies from failing, and may arguably have distracted the agencies from focusing on the things that mattered.

The process of "influencing the activities of an individual or group in efforts toward accomplishing goals in a given situation" does not really allow for validation of goals, or the identification of the concerns and needs of the group. A leader who knows nothing about the field of work can say "leadership doesn't depend on that". A leader who is not listening can say "I am being determined". A leader who doesn't understand delegation can say "I am leading by example". Leadership can be used to justify practice which is unpredictable and arbitrary: jarring inconsistencies in management style are excused by managers who say, for example, that they are shifting between direction and passion, between creativity and delegation. And so it goes on. We have furnished managers with an armoury of justifications for incompetence.

It is difficult to make a firm, evidential case in response to the claims made on behalf of

“leadership”, because any criticisms can be deflected in three ways. First, the arguments run, that is not the definition of or understanding of leadership that we were talking about; second, leadership has to be adaptable to circumstances and contexts, and if it has failed to adapt appropriately, it is not good leadership; third, evidence of bad practice does not undermine the normative case for good practice.

The difficulty of falsifying the propositions surrounding leadership should not be taken to mean, however, that they are immune from criticism. The arguments that I have reviewed here point to three core objections to the ideology of leadership, in most contexts where it applies. They are that:

- there is no good reason to suppose that leadership is a primary influence on the behaviour of most organisations;
- there is no evident reason why the supposed roles, tasks, or qualities of “leadership” either need to be or should be concentrated in the person of a leader, or in a leadership group; and
- the tasks involved in “leading” an organisation are not in fact the tasks of motivation, influence or direction of others which are at the core of the leadership literature.

Beyond that, there is reason to question the assumption that any such principles are transferable to public services:

- the conditions under which government and public services operate are significantly different from other organisations;
- there is no standard of skills, behaviours or roles which is generically applicable to people in positions of responsibility throughout the public services;
- the emphasis in leadership theory on personal relationships may be inconsistent with the objectives and character of the service; and
- the arrogation to a public service manager of a leadership role may be illegitimate.

This goes beyond any concern that the idea is worthless, or that the Emperor has no clothes. The idea of leadership does add something to discussion. Unfortunately, what it adds in the context of public management is deeply misconceived: an arrogation of power and a distraction from the purposes and values of public service.

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