



ESRC

ESRC Seminar Series

Mapping the public policy landscape

Leadership in the public sector in Scotland





Foreword

Leadership is enormously important to the success of public service organisations in Scotland – now so more than ever, given the current economic climate and the Scottish Government's objective of creating a more successful country through partnership. There has been strong commitment to the provision of leadership development for public sector staff in Scotland in recent years – not least by the Scottish Government.

As public services pursue this fresh and complex agenda, against a backdrop of straitened times and ebbing confidence in organisational leaders, the Scottish Government has taken the opportunity to assess the state of play with leadership theory and its application in Scotland, and ask how it might better serve citizens in the future.

This publication is intended to stimulate a conversation amongst practitioners and others about the utility of established and emerging theories of leadership. In so doing, it draws on contributions from Keith Grint, Professor of Public Leadership and Management at Warwick University; and Graeme Martin, Professor and Director of the Centre for Reputation Management through People at the University of Glasgow's Business School, at the *Leadership in the Public Sector in Scotland* seminar held at Victoria Quay, Edinburgh, on 19 May 2009.

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Scottish Government organised the seminar, thus providing an opportunity for delegates to consider how new theories might help explain recent and current events, and inform better leadership, and leadership development, in the future. *Leadership in the Public Sector in Scotland* is one of a series of ESRC public policy seminars, at which the UK's leading social scientists present their thinking and its implications.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Ian Diamond'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized 'I' and 'D'.

Professor Ian Diamond AcSS
Chief Executive
Economic and Social Research Council



Leadership in the public sector in Scotland

Contributors

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ROBIN WENSLEY is Professor of Policy and Marketing at Warwick University and currently Director of the Advanced Institute of Management Research. He has published widely in the fields of marketing strategy, investment decision-making, decision processes, competitive market evolution, and the role of choice in public policy.

BARBARA DOIG is an independent knowledge broker helping organisations and individuals to develop capacity in using the evidence base for policy and practice. She is a former Scottish Government Chief Researcher, and has also worked in senior policy and operational roles. She is a member of the Academy of Social Sciences, and recently stepped down from positions as Chair of the UK Social Research Association and as a member of the ESRC Communications and Information Committee.

PAUL GRAY is the Scottish Government's Director of Change and Corporate Services, with responsibility for senior staff development and deployment, human resources, information systems and services, accommodation and estates services, corporate learning, employee engagement, and the Scottish Government's business improvement and change programmes.

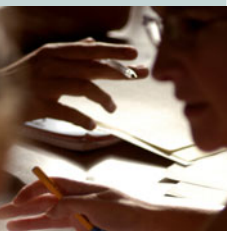
CLIVE MARTLEW is Head of Corporate Learning at the Scottish Government. He has recently been part of the facilitation team for the Harvard Kennedy School programme 'The Art and Practice of Leadership Development', and since 2007 has been part of a European consortium with INSEAD, FIAT and IKEA developing leadership programmes to enhance change management skills. Clive was previously training and development manager at Glasgow City Council, and has worked as a consultant and as a university teacher and researcher in public management and finance. He is widely published on public policy and management, and has experience of leadership and organisation development with organisations in the UK, Europe and the Far East.

Executive Summary

Key points:

Leading wicked problems

- There are many important distinctions between management and leadership. Management can be linked to certainty and leadership to uncertainty. Using Rittel and Webber's typology, management can also be associated with 'tame' problems and leadership with 'wicked' problems.
- A tame problem is resolvable through a single, consistent path of acts and is likely to have occurred before. Wicked problems are complex and require leaders to facilitate innovative responses rather than rolling out known processes.
- A third form of authority can also exist – that of the commander. In critical situations, when there is little time for decision-making and action, commanders emerge to provide an answer.
- Many of the problems facing Scottish public services are deeply complex 'wicked' social issues that sit across and between different government organisations and attempts to treat them as 'tame' through a single institutional framework are almost bound to fail.
- Wicked problems rarely reach a point at which it can be said that they have been solved. The leader's role with a 'wicked' problem is to ask the right questions rather than provide the right answers, which requires collaboration.
- Leadership success is rooted in persuading followers that at any one time the problematic situation is one of a 'critical', 'tame' or 'wicked' nature and adjusting behaviour to the appropriate authority form – command, management or leadership.



Do we need a Leadership 2.0 for new times in Scotland and its public sector?

- Although most evident in the private sector, current problems of corporate governance and leadership associated with the global economic crisis are apparent in the Scottish public sector, with trust in senior leadership worryingly low.
- In recent times the cult of 'celebrity leadership' has been a notable if questionable trend in business and the public sector. The current backlash against this has potentially damaging consequences for Scottish organisations, with many seeing leaders privilege wealth protection and risk management at the expense of wealth creation.
- As a result of these concerns there have been calls for Management 2.0, a private sector management to be more closely aligned to the ideals of public sector leadership, with its traditional focus on stakeholders and creating public value. However, this does not match the reality.
- In Scotland, leadership (and leadership development) has been privileged as a solution to problems of change in the public sector. However, fragmentation has brought duplication of effort, a lack of sharing of ideas of what has worked effectively and, little evidence that investment in leadership development has paid off.
- New demands on leadership in the Scottish public sector are not likely to be well served by traditional leadership development. Instead, public sector practitioners, university business schools and consultants must work together to help leaders learn from each other.

Introduction

Increasingly, leadership is seen as key to Scottish public service organisations meeting the high expectations placed upon them. Its importance is seen as central to organisational performance – particularly in achieving efficiency savings, and in meeting the Scottish Government's overarching purpose of creating a more successful country where all of Scotland can flourish through increasing sustainable economic growth.

Today, public sector leadership in Scotland is pursued in an environment of great complexity, with public servants having to work across blurred organisational boundaries. The Scottish Government has put particular emphasis on working in partnership with stakeholders, with a view to agreeing what can be achieved for Scotland – and how.

To date, this emphasis on partnership working has been particularly evident in the local government arena, with the Scottish Government signing a Concordat with the Scottish Local Authorities setting out the terms of a new relationship between national and local government in November 2007. Under the Concordat each local authority has reached a Single Outcome Agreement with the Scottish Government – based on National Outcomes, but reflecting local circumstances and priorities. This new approach to working gives increased prominence to the leadership skills of all partners involved.

Given this fresh emphasis on partnership working against a backdrop of global turbulence and severe pressure on resources, now is an appropriate time to revisit ideas of leadership as they apply to Scotland and consider how they might best be applied.

In recent years there has been a huge expansion in the provision of leadership development for those working in the Scottish public sector. The Scottish Government has itself launched a number of leadership development programmes – designed to enhance the leadership skills of its own staff, and those elsewhere in the public sector. However, this expanding 'leadership training industry' has not found favour with all, with suggestions that leadership teaching is 'uncritical' and its impact inadequately evaluated.

There has been much written about theories of leadership but little that interrogates the growing literature in a way that may inform future development. Accordingly, this publication and seminar will provide a critical overview of developments in leadership theory in recent years, and of its application through Scottish public sector leadership development training.

As well as offering an insight into current academic thinking on public sector leadership in Scotland, one of the aims of the publication and seminar is to provide a stocktake of public sector leadership development provision. Going forward, the content (including delegate contributions at the seminar) will help to inform conversations on the limitations of existing provision and how it might be improved, how new thinking on leadership theory might address any shortcomings identified, and the challenges to leadership development posed by the current economic climate.



Leading wicked problems

Many of the challenges facing Scottish public services are complex social problems that fall across organisational boundaries. Keith Grint makes the case for collective approaches to their solution, and for a flexible leadership that derives its authority through the decision-maker's persuasive framing of the problem in context.

Much of the writing in the field of leadership research is grounded in a typology that distinguishes between leadership and management as different forms of authority or legitimate power. Leadership tends to embody longer time periods with a more strategic perspective and a requirement to resolve novel problems. The division is rooted partly in the context – management is the equivalent of *déjà vu* (seen this before), whereas leadership is the equivalent of *vu jà dé* (never seen this before). If this is valid then the manager is required to engage the requisite process to resolve the problem the last time it emerged. By contrast, the leader is required to facilitate the construction of an innovative response to a novel problem, rather than simply rolling out a known process.

Tame and wicked problems

Management and leadership, as two forms of authority rooted in the distinction between certainty and uncertainty, can also be related to Rittel and Webber's typology of 'tame' and 'wicked' problems. A tame problem may be complicated but is resolvable through unilinear acts. In other words, there is only a limited degree of uncertainty and thus it is associated with management. Tame problems are akin to puzzles, for which there is always an answer. We might consider how F.W. Taylor (the originator of scientific management) epitomised this approach to problem solving – simply apply science properly and the best solution will naturally emerge. The (scientific) manager's role, therefore, is to apply the appropriate process to solve the problem. Examples of this might include timetabling railways, building a nuclear plant, training an army, planned heart surgery or a wage negotiation. In Scotland, as everywhere else, tame problems are what we deal with successfully most of the time.

As well as being more complicated, a wicked problem is more complex – that is, it cannot be removed from its environment, solved, and returned without affecting the environment. Moreover, there is no clear relationship between cause and effect. Such problems are often intractable – for instance, trying to develop a health service on the basis of a scientific approach (assuming it was a tame problem) would suggest providing everyone with all the services and medicines they required based only on their medical needs. However, with an ageing population, an increasing medical ability to intervene and maintain life, a potentially infinite increase in demand but a finite level of resource, there cannot be a purely scientific solution to the problem of health provision. In sum we cannot provide everything for everybody – at some point we need to make a political decision about who gets what, and based on which criteria.

Categories of problems

This inherently contested arena is typical of a wicked problem. If we think about health services as illness services, then we have a different understanding of the problem because it is essentially a series of tame problems – fixing a broken leg is the equivalent of a tame problem in that there is a scientific solution so that medical professionals in hospitals know how to fix them. But if you crawl into a restaurant for your broken leg to be fixed it becomes a wicked problem, because it's unlikely that anyone there will have the knowledge or the resources to fix it. Thus the category of problem is subjective not objective – what kind of a problem you have depends on where you are sitting and what you already know. To most people, how the financial fallout from the Dunfermline Building Society and Royal Bank of Scotland affects Scotland is a wicked problem – it is not self-evident what the response should be, but if you have just lost your job it's a crisis.

Moreover, many of the problems that face Scottish public services – obesity, drug abuse, violence – are not simply problems of health. Rather, they are often deeply complex social problems that sit across and between different government departments and institutions, so attempts to treat them through a single institutional framework are almost bound to fail. Indeed, because with wicked problems we rarely reach a point at which we can say they are solved (for example, there will be no more crime because we have solved it), we often end up having to admit that we cannot solve wicked problems.

The pressure to act decisively

Conventionally, we associate leadership with precisely the opposite – the ability to solve problems, act decisively and to know what to do. But wicked problems often embody the exact opposite of this – we cannot solve them, and we need to be very wary of acting decisively precisely because we cannot know what to do. If we knew what to do, of course, it would be a tame problem, and the pressure to act decisively often leads us to try to solve the problem as if it were.

When global warming first emerged as a problem some of the responses concentrated on solving it through science (a tame response), manifest in the development of biofuels. However, we now know that biofuels appear to strip the world of significant food resources, so that what looked like a solution actually became another problem. Again, this is typical of what happens when we try to solve wicked problems – other problems emerge to compound the original problem. So we can make things better (by driving our cars less) or worse (by driving our cars more), but we may not be able to solve global warming. Instead, we may just have to learn to live with a different world and make the best of it. In other words, we cannot start again and design a perfect future – though many political and religious extremists might want us to.



Wicked problems – engaging the collective

The 'we' in this is important, because it signifies the importance of the collective in addressing wicked problems. A tame problem might have an individual solution in the sense that an individual is likely to know how to deal with it. But since wicked problems are partly defined by the absence of an answer on the part of the leader, it behoves the individual leader to engage the collective in an attempt to come to terms with the problem. In other words, wicked problems require the transfer of authority from individual to collective. The uncertainty involved in wicked problems imply that leadership is not a science but an art – the art of engaging a community in facing up to complex collective problems.

The leader's role with a wicked problem, therefore, is to ask the right questions rather than provide the right answers, because the answers may not be self-evident and will require a collaborative process if any kind of progress is to be made. Examples might include developing a transport strategy, responses to global warming or anti-social behaviour, or a national health system. Wicked problems are not necessarily rooted in longer time frames than tame problems because often an issue that appears to be tame or 'critical' can be turned into a wicked problem, at least temporarily, by delaying the decision.

Critical problems and the commander

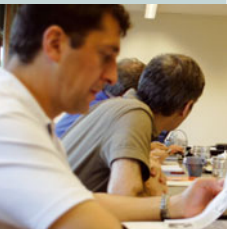
A critical problem, for example a crisis, is presented as self-evident in nature, as encapsulating very little time for decision-making and action, and is often associated with authoritarianism. Here there is virtually no uncertainty about what needs to be done, at least in the behaviour of the commander whose role is to take the required decisive action – not to apply the appropriate process to solve the problem (management) or ask questions (leadership), but to provide the answer:


Of course, it may be that the commander remains privately uncertain about whether the action is appropriate or the presentation of the situation as a crisis is persuasive, but such uncertainty will probably not be apparent to the followers of the commander. Examples might include the immediate response to a major train crash, a leak from a nuclear plant, a military attack, a heart attack, an industrial strike, the loss of employment or a loved one, or a terrorist attack such as that of July 2007 upon Glasgow Airport.

Legitimate action and persuasive accounts

These three forms of authority – command, management and leadership – suggest that the role of those responsible for decision-making is to find the appropriate answer, process and question to address the problem respectively. This is not meant as a discrete typology, but as an heuristic device to enable us to understand why those charged with decision-making sometimes appear to act in ways that others find incomprehensible. This is not to suggest that the correct decision-making process lies in the correct analysis of the situation (which would be to generate a deterministic approach), but instead that decision-makers tend to legitimise their actions on the basis of a persuasive account of the situation. In short, the social construction of the problem legitimises the deployment of a particular form of authority.

Moreover, it is often the case that the same individual or group with authority will switch between the command, management and leadership roles as they perceive (and constitute) the problem as critical, tame or wicked, or even as a single problem that itself shifts across these boundaries. Indeed, such movement – often perceived as 'inconsistency' by the decision maker's opponents – is crucial to success as the situation, or at least our perception of it, changes.





This persuasive account of the problem partly rests in the decision-maker's access to (and preference for) particular forms of power, and herein lies the irony of leadership. It remains the most difficult of approaches and one that many decision-makers will try to avoid at all costs because it implies that, (i) the leader does not have the answer, (ii) that the leader's role is to make the followers face up to their responsibilities (often an unpopular task), (iii) that the 'answer' to the problem is going to take a long time to construct and will only ever be 'more appropriate' rather than 'the best', and (iv) that it will require constant effort to maintain. It is far easier, then, to opt either for a management solution (by engaging a tried and trusted process) or a command solution (enforcing 'the answer' upon followers – some of whom may prefer this).

Typologies of compliance and problem

The notion of 'enforcement' suggests that we need to consider how different approaches to, and forms of, power fit with this typology of authority, and amongst the most useful for this purpose is Etzioni's (1964) typology of compliance. Etzioni distinguished between 'coercive', 'calculative' and 'normative' compliance:

- coercive or physical power is related to 'total' institutions, such as prisons or armies
- calculative compliance is related to 'rational' institutions, such as companies, and
- normative compliance is related to institutions or organisations based on shared values, such as clubs and professional societies.

This compliance typology fits well with the typology of problems:

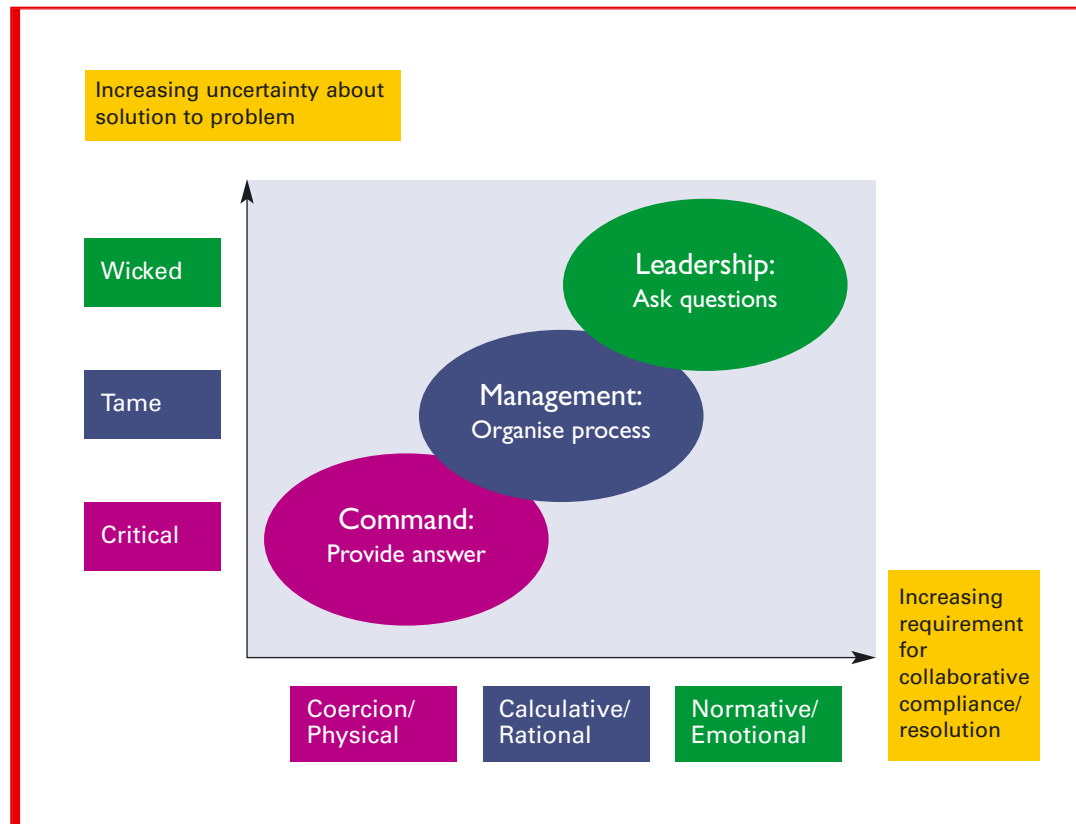
- critical problems are often associated with coercive compliance
- tame problems are associated with calculative compliance, and
- wicked problems are associated with normative compliance.

Again, this is not to suggest that we can divide the world up objectively into particular kinds of problems and their associated appropriate authority forms but, instead, that the very legitimacy of the authority form is dependent upon a successful rendition of a phenomenon as a particular kind of problem. In other words, while contingency theory suggests precisely this rational connection between context and leadership style (authority form), what counts as legitimate authority depends upon a persuasive rendition of the context and display of the appropriate authority style.

Success is rooted in persuading followers that at any one time the problematic situation is one of a critical, tame or wicked nature and that, therefore, the appropriate authority form is command, management or leadership in which the role of the decision-maker is to provide the answer, organise the process or ask the question, respectively. In effect, one particular skill that all three decision-modes require is that of reframing problems – seeing the problem differently with a view to addressing it differently.

This typology can be plotted along the relationship between two axes as shown in Figure 1, with the vertical axis representing increasing uncertainty about the solution to the problem – in the behaviour of those in authority – and the horizontal axis representing the increasing need for collaboration in resolving the problem. What might also be evident from this figure is that the more decision-makers constitute the problem as wicked and interpret their power as essentially normative, the more difficult their task becomes – especially with cultures that associate leadership with the effective and efficient resolution of problems.

Figure 1: Typology of problems, power and authority (Grint 2005)



Future research priorities

What are the implications of this typology for further research?

- Does the typology explain why we have such difficulty addressing wicked problems – because they might not have a tame solution?
- Does the typology require leaders of all kinds to begin by admitting that they might not have the answer, though they might have a process in mind to address the problem?
- Many organisations might treat wicked problems as tame problems – hence their inability to resolve them through conventional means. But is it also the case that treating tame problems as wicked problems simply serves as a means to avoid taking responsibility and delay decision-making?
- Do we need to beware of promoting commanders into senior positions just because they are good in a crisis, when the ability to switch between decision-styles might be more appropriate for long-term success?
- Problems do not arrive in neatly marked boxes that are labelled 'tame', 'wicked' or 'critical' – more often they arrive in a leaky bag with no label, and may contain elements of all three types. What is the best way to assess a situation?

Do we need a Leadership 2.0 for new times in Scotland and its public sector?

Graeme Martin makes the case that the demands of collaborative leadership and partnership working in the face of wicked problems requires leaders, university business schools and consultants to work together to help leaders learn from each other.

A major problem of corporate governance and leadership worldwide, associated with the global economic crisis and liquidity problems, has been recently articulated by Hamel (2009) who, along with Birkinshaw from London Business School, has called for a reinvention of management for a new age.

This global leadership problem, which turns on a decline in trust, is especially acute in Scotland following the demise of major financial services companies. Although most evident in the private sector, these problems are also apparent in the Scottish public sector – trust in senior leadership is worryingly low and, deserved or not, it is a problem senior leaders must address.

Different leadership theories can help us explain what seems to be going on, and help point the way towards greater organisational effectiveness. This is particularly true for public sector organisations in Scotland which are challenged by the new 'wicked problems' created by simultaneous demands for tighter public spending, evaluation of investment in human capital, Single Outcome Agreements and an emphasis on partnership working. These demands on leadership are not likely to be well served by the traditional and fragmented system of leadership development in the Scottish public sector. Instead, what is needed is for public sector leaders, university business schools and consultants to work together to help leaders learn from each other by engaging in reflective action to create both client satisfaction and public value.



Scottish leadership and leadership theory – a crisis of confidence?

In March 2009 a debate on problems facing the Scottish economy – part of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development 'Shaping the Future' programme – saw a group of senior HR directors representing Scotland's largest private and public sector organisations raise issues relevant to leadership problems in Scotland.

The first was the corporate governance crisis associated with the demise of financial services companies and the role played by senior leadership. It appears that even ordinary banking employees in organisations relatively unaffected by the crisis have been given counselling to help them cope with the venom directed towards them because of the actions of their leaders.

However, the discussion also focused on broader concerns emerging from this fall from grace of Scottish companies, one of which was the negative consequences of a potential crisis of confidence among Scottish leaders so that they revert to 'not getting above themselves' – a problem discussed in a locally influential book by Craig (2003) on Scottish character and the economy.

In one sense, this crisis of confidence may be no bad thing, given that leaders worldwide and in Scotland have benefited disproportionately in financial and reputational terms over the last twenty or so years (Khurana, 2002, 2007). This cult of 'celebrity leadership' has been one of the notable trends in business and the public sector in recent times – mystifying many business school academics because of a lack of evidence of positive impact by such figures on organisational performance (Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006; Rosenzweig, 2007), against plenty of evidence of negative impact (Kellerman, 2004; 2008).

However, in another sense it has potentially damaging consequences for Scottish organisations, because it may see corporate boards and leaders begin to privilege wealth protection and risk management at the expense of wealth creation (Martin and McGoldrick, 2009). Scotland, like most advanced industrialised countries, can only compete on innovation and entrepreneurship, and it has had a relatively poor record of doing that in recent memory – despite Scottish universities punching above their weight in terms of important inventions.

Market failure and Management 1.0

This reflection mirrors a more systematic discussion between a group of management scholars, new-age management thinkers, progressive CEOs and venture capitalists held in Half Moon Bay, California, in May 2008, facilitated by Hamel and Birkinshaw (<http://www.managementlab.org/>). Prompted by a book by Hamel (2007) on the 'Future of Management', these two academics have argued that recent economic problems have been 'an astounding market failure' in which old style Management 1.0 – with its focus on incentives, self-interest, and neglect of risk management and trust relations – is heavily implicated.

Thus, organisations have increasingly been treated as markets for the last thirty years rather than as fulfilling important social functions in society – a business philosophy associated, amongst other things, with the (mis)attribution of organisational success to talented individuals, and corresponding reward.

Hamel and Birkinshaw recently cited Ghosal (2006) who argued that business schools in the UK have been teaching too much self interest and not enough ethics – a line of argument compellingly made by Khurana (2007) in his history of American business schools. Thus Hamel and Birkinshaw have been moved to 're-orient management from compliance to creativity, from flogging efficiencies out of existing resources to generating new ones'. In short, the call is for Management 2.0 to focus on innovation, employees and other stakeholders rather than on costs and shareholders.

Management 2.0

Hamel's Harvard Business Review article 'Moonshots for Management' (2009) draws on results from the Half Moon Bay discussion in asking what needs to be done to create organisations that "are truly fit for the future", with each resulting 'moon shot' illuminating a "critical path in the journey to Management 2.0". The consensus was that companies needed to articulate a purpose beyond making money, to ensure distributed leadership and strategy-making rather than the traditional top-down model – fostering community and citizenship and building trust. These ideas speak to the legitimacy dimension of the corporate reputations agenda that has been a sub-text of many courses taught in business schools, but was relatively muted until Enron.

So what do companies seeking to embrace Management 2.0 have in common? Twenty-five ideas were proposed with a general consensus that the first ten were the most important (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2: The ten most important 'moonshots' (adapted from Hamel, 2009)

Ensure that the work of management serves a higher purpose – companies need to articulate a purpose beyond making money.
Fully embed the ideas of community and citizenship in management systems.
Reconstruct management's philosophical foundations to be adaptable, innovative, inspiring and socially responsible, as well as operationally excellent.
Eliminate the problems created by hierarchy, including privileging experience over new ideas, giving followers no influence over their leaders and undermining the self-worth of individuals.
Reduce fear and increase trust to increase commitment, remove a fear of failure and promote knowledge sharing.
Reinvent the means of control to encourage innovation as well as risk management.
Redefine the work of leaders so that they are seen not as grand visionaries, all-seeing decision-makers and disciplinarians, but architects and facilitators of employee collaboration.
Expand and exploit diversity to increase the variety of ideas, options and experiments in organisations.
Reinvent strategy-making as an emergent and option-laden process rather than a top-down, 'one size fits all' plan.
De-structure and disaggregate the organisation to remove barriers to innovation, personal fiefdoms and create fast-moving, reconfigurable structures that can intercept opportunities and reflect dynamic environments.

In many respects current leadership problems mirror the Half Moon Bay analysis. This is important, because just before the financial crisis broke there were signs – particularly in England – that the public sector was beginning to ape the private sector in its attribution of success (and failure) to charismatic or transformational leadership. Some important lessons can be learned here, since one reading of Figure 2 is that it calls for a private sector more closely aligned to the ideals of public sector leadership, with its traditional focus on stakeholders and creating public value. However, that ideal does not match the reality – at least as perceived by significant segments of public sector employees in Scotland. Nor, arguably, is public sector leadership noted for generating the kinds of dynamic capabilities necessary to encourage innovation and respond to rapidly changing environments.



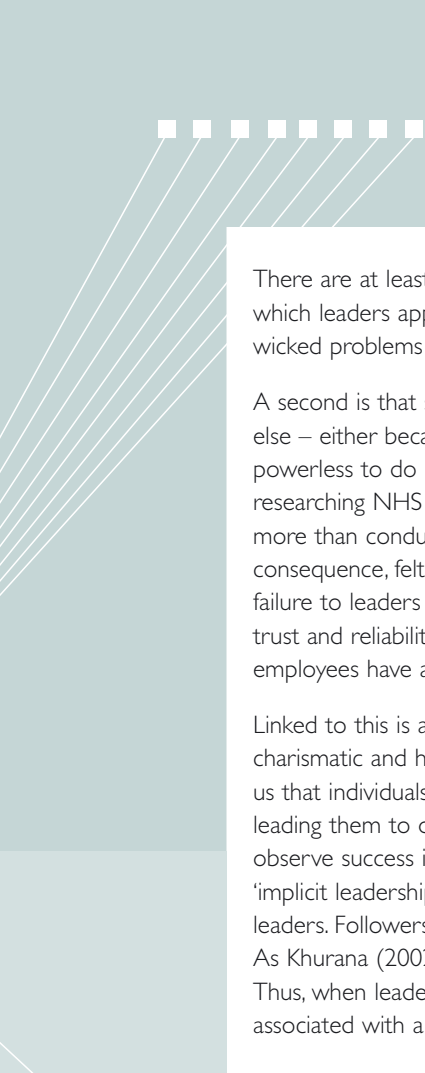
The public sector leadership problem in Scotland and leadership theory

The Scottish Government and its agencies cannot reasonably be accused of neglecting leadership as a driver of change in recent years. Various reports have privileged leadership as a solution to problems of change in healthcare, education, social work, local government, the emergency services and the Civil Service itself, with leadership and leadership development being a key agenda item on two conferences for Scottish public sector chief executives. In addition, the Government has established a programme for senior leaders using the ideas of Mark Moore from the Harvard Kennedy School, who has linked leadership to the creation of public value.

A number of agencies have established context-specific leadership competence frameworks. However, although such fragmentation is inevitable and even desirable, it has resulted in duplication of effort, a lack of sharing of ideas of what has worked effectively and, from the perspective of Audit Scotland, little evidence that the multi-million pound investment in leadership development has paid off.

Perhaps even more worrying is recent survey evidence showing that only 27 per cent of staff in healthcare believe their senior leaders manage change effectively and only 43 per cent believe senior managers in Boards are focused on meeting patients/clients needs (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/924/0076459.pdf>). Indeed unpublished research suggests that a dominant view from below is of senior managers who are target driven, too interested in playing politics, not interested in patients, and disconnected from professional colleagues and other staff. Similarly, recent employee surveys in the Scottish Government show that employees do not see their senior leaders as visible enough, have little confidence in them and do not believe that the Scottish Government is well managed (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/02/19114652/1>). These latter views are particularly worrying because leadership is a key driver of employee engagement.





There are at least three lines of argument from leadership theory that might help explain the low regard in which leaders appear to be held. The first has already been elaborated by Keith Grint – that we cannot solve wicked problems through proven ‘process’ approaches.

A second is that senior leaders in the Scottish public sector may be seen to pursue self-interest above all else – either because of personal motivations or, more likely, because they perceive themselves relatively powerless to do much else other than respond to short-term targets and agendas. Blackler (2006), researching NHS leadership in England and Wales, reported that chief executives saw themselves as little more than conduits for central government policies and targets rather than reformers and, as a consequence, felt demoralised and undermined. Given that we often attribute reputational success and failure to leaders according to how well they service our material aims and match up to our expectations of trust and reliability (Geoffrey Love and Kraatz, 2009), it should be of little surprise that many public sector employees have a negative view of their leaders who regard themselves as victims.

Linked to this is a third explanation, which relates to the increased expectations we have of leadership to be charismatic and how we attribute reputational success and failure to organisations. ‘Attribution theory’ tells us that individuals develop relatively simple explanations for the behaviours and outcomes of leaders, often leading them to over-attribute cause to personal characteristics and under-attribute to the situation. Thus, we observe success in an organisation and infer that it was due to leaders’ personal abilities. Its close cousin, ‘implicit leadership theory’ argues that leadership is as much a property of followership as of the abilities of leaders. Followers develop culturally defined expectations of their leaders, against which they are assessed. As Khurana (2002) and others have argued, these expectations are of charismatic or celebrity leaders. Thus, when leaders do not or, as is often the case in a public sector context, cannot match up to ideals associated with a private sector model we rate them poorly.

New challenges and responses

Aside from the current problems facing Scotland’s public sector leaders, attention must be paid to the specific challenge of the introduction of Single Outcome Agreements against the backdrop of future public sector finance created by current levels of Central and Scottish Government spending.

One of the main vehicles for delivering Single Outcome Agreements is Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) – bringing together public sector organisations, local communities, and the third and private sectors. Thus, Scotland’s public sector leaders will be expected to deliver more in a very different way, by planning and implementing enormous programmes of changes to service delivery that meet the Government’s five strategic objectives through structures they do not control. If that were not a wicked problem in its own right, then combine this challenge with as yet unknown cuts in financial resources and we have a situation for which there are few parallels or relevant leadership experience.

Distributed leadership theory seems to offer some help in asking sensible questions. According to Gronn (2002), distributed leadership relies on ‘concertive action’ where people pool ideas and expertise, so producing services and leadership energy that is greater than the sum of their individual capabilities. It also means re-thinking the boundaries of organisations within which leadership is to be distributed – particularly relevant to Single Outcome Agreements and partnership working – and recognises that expertise is owned by the many rather than the few. As Gronn recognises, such an approach requires a significant shift in cultures and mental models of current leaders, many of whom have been used to running their own fiefdoms with little interference.

Few attempts have been made to develop distributed leadership in the Scottish public sector and even fewer to evaluate its success. One exception is multi-agency partnership work in Fife – a programme of collaborative leadership development for middle managers recently evaluated as part of an action-research Masters project (Harkins, 2009). Though the evaluation is at a preliminary stage, findings that the teaching modules on leadership run by the University of St Andrews were judged by participants to be the most effective form of learning are worth bearing in mind when we discuss how to best support partnership working and distributed or collaborative leadership under conditions of financial stringency.

Given the central themes of this paper – the requirements to rethink leadership as less of a property of individuals, the needs for senior Scottish public sector leaders to re-brand themselves to engage employees in difficult times, and the simultaneous demands of collaborative leadership and partnership working in the face of wicked problems – new(ish) solutions to leadership development are now required.

In short, we may well need a form of organisation for leadership development that has been in the ether in Scotland for many years – a collaboration between:

- public sector leadership practitioners (and others in the CPPs) as consumers and producers of knowledge and action on leadership
- Scottish universities as research-led producers and disseminators of leadership knowledge and brokers between world-wide expertise and leaders, and
- management consultants, which bring international expertise, project management and financial acumen to the table.

Such collaborations have been widely discussed and evaluated in a recent book by Shami, Mohrman, Pasmore et al (2008), which draws on examples of collaborative knowledge creation and dissemination about leadership in the USA and Sweden. These appeared to embrace the best of active learning, critical reflection and active intervention, rooted in rigorous but relevant research. They might also benefit the collaborators – especially the Scottish university business schools that have been criticised for being disconnected from practice at a senior level (Martin and Robson, 2007) and subject to a recent inquiry by the Scottish Funding Council that has proposed the need for more engaged research and contact with Scotland's larger organisations to improve their international reputations (Royal Society of Edinburgh, 21 April 2009). Such an approach may go some way to lifting the public sector agencies and their CPP partners, the universities and the consultants out of their silos to focus on the Government's strategic objectives of a wealthier and fairer, healthier, safer and stronger, smarter and greener Scotland.

Future research priorities

1. Is there a specifically Scottish dimension that needs to be taken into account when selecting, developing and performance managing Scottish public sector leaders?
2. What can be done to connect leadership with followership in the Scottish public services (and what does this imply for followers)?
3. Should we better assess the impact of investment in leadership development and, if so, how?
4. What would a collaborative response to the problems of collaborative/distributed leadership look like?

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