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Title - Collective Leadership: the self, the group and the system. Perceptions and practices of leadership, where the leading is meant to be shared.

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Collective Leadership: the self, the group and the system. Perceptions and practices of leadership, where the leading is meant to be shared.

Summary

This paper explores the experiences and perceptions of professionals working on collective challenges across organisational boundaries in Scotland's Public Services. The author does so through the lens of relationality, exploring how individuals engage and lead together in their practice. The contribution to theory is a qualitative understanding of collective leadership illuminated by context. The focus on how we work together in groups, across boundaries and sectors provides a rich setting to examine aspects of individual and group process, helping us to understand and make sense of what it means to work in this way. The author offers a contemporary, bounded view of collective leadership where paying attention to the relational aspects of group work and privileging the individual, the group process and the relationship between them, above the shared task, may offer an alternative and enlightening approach for teams collaborating across boundaries.

Keywords: Collective Leadership, Systems, Group Process, Relationality.

Word count – 1959

Introduction

Public leadership is defined by Getha-Taylor et al (2011) as leadership with a common purpose and difficult challenges, working across boundaries with and for a range of stakeholders often with limited budgets and competing ideals.

Brookes and Grint (2010, p554) go a little further and define public leadership as,

“A form of collective leadership in which public bodies and agencies collaborate in achieving a shared vision on shared aims and values and distribute this through each organisation in a collegiate way which seeks to promote, influence and deliver improved public value as evidenced through sustained social, environmental and economic well-being within a complex and changing context”.

This definition delivers a sense of the current conditions and environment in which public services operate. It provides, a somewhat enticing response, to how best to deal with complex problems and to create public value, it also invites a discussion on process, and what steps are needed, in order to achieve ‘a form of collective leadership’.

Theoretical Framework

Collective Leadership demands an exploration into the empirical reality of old and new forms of leadership. Collective Leadership theories such as network leadership (Cullen-Lester and Yammarino 2016, Van Wart 2014), complexity leadership (Uhl-Bien and Marion 2009), discursive leadership (Fairhurst 2007), and constructionist collective leadership (Drath 2001; Endres and Weibler 2017; Ospina et al 2012) share a view of leadership as an emergent, relational process, intent on building a shared capacity for working in complex and uncertain environments. Furthermore there is a pull away from the formal leader towards a focus on the practice of leadership (Crosby and Bryson 2018, Ospina 2017, Ospina and Foldy 2015; Uhl-Bien 2011, Denis et al 2001).

Ospina (2017) argues that ‘Collective Leadership theories push the relational nature of leadership to its limits’ by moving beyond leadership as a characteristic of particular individuals to one where leadership is generated from a co-created process, in pursuit of the conditions that support the formation of ‘leaderful organisations’ (Raelin 2019, 2005). Orr and Bennett (2016, p517) comment that ‘a relational lens avoids looking for traits, great persons or even behavioural styles and instead focuses on how processes of leadership emerge in organisational settings’. Thus leadership is viewed as both process and outcome as capacity is generated in the collaborative spaces where members work and produce results together (Drath et al 2008).

Collective Leadership theories do not propose to replace or criticise other leadership studies or debates, for example they do not dispute the importance and significance of the formal leader, but they do offer the researcher and professional a way to consider how leadership may unfold and emerge within groups and the wider system (Ospina 2017, Senge 1991). These theories allow a different perspective on leadership, firmly held within a rich, interactive context where

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assumptions of individuality, in which leadership is viewed as a top-down influence is not ignored, but considered within a wider frame which includes relationships, process and context. If working towards advancing leadership theories that have relevance and application for practice, then we must consider broadening the scope of traditional approaches to leadership, pay more attention to theories of leadership that promote its relational qualities (Uhl-Bien 2011) and think about the shared and collective dimensions of leadership.

Research Aim – to explore perceptions and experiences of collective leadership.

RQ1: How do actors understand leadership within a collective leadership context?

RQ2: How is collective leadership experienced by actors working in this way?

RQ3: What are the challenges and promise of collective leadership efforts?

Method

Data collection is still ongoing. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, the primary aim is to access the perceptions of a range of staff across public services in understanding their collective leadership experience. 14 qualitative, semi-structured interviews have been conducted (to date) to collect the data. Interviews have lasted between 60 – 90 minutes and are digitally recorded to be transcribed later. Given the nature of the study and the area of interest, that of how we work and lead together in groups across boundaries, the main inclusion criteria of the selected sample has been based upon their professional role and their suitability to the aim of the study. A ‘purposive’ sampling strategy (Denzin and Lincoln 2011; Miles and Huberman 1994) was considered to be the most effective method to recruit the participants. The key actors identified include, senior executives, managers, head teachers and clinicians (Table 1) who are either working within, facilitating, advising or supporting a collective leadership approach. Participants were drawn from different cross organisational groups and settings which covered themes such as; hate crime, domestic violence, supporting children and vulnerable families and health and social care integration. To improve the validity of the findings team leadership professionals working outside the boundary of the ‘sample strategy’ will be interviewed.

Table 1 Data Exposure

Type of Role	Organisation/Sector	Interviews planned
Civil Servant	Scottish Government	3
Senior Civil Servant (Director Level)	Scottish Government	4
Child Psychologist	Local Authority	1
Workforce Development Manager	Local Authority	1
Head of Finance	Local Authority	1
Education Manager (Children & Families)	Local Authority	1
Head Teacher	Local Authority	3
Principal Lead (Training & Education)	NHS	1
Emergency Medicine Doctor	NHS	1
Coach/Team Consultant	Private	2
Programme Manager	Improvement Service	1
Senior Lecturer (Social Work & Leadership)	University	1

Interview data were transcribed manually (ongoing), interview transcripts will be analysed by

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defining, categorising, theorising, exploring and mapping the data, (Bryman & Burgess 2002). The data will be subjected to thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Grbich (2013) as a process of data reduction and a search for patterns.

Preliminary Insights – Drawn from the Data [early thoughts and interpretations]

Many participants express what is different about collective leadership. They do so by describing the different ways they have collaborated and worked together across organisational boundaries. Collective leadership is seen as being one of those ways and is described by some as being at one end of a ‘collaboration spectrum’ with partnership working at the other end. Others compare partnership working, collaboration and collective leadership to, *the first, second and third order of change* (see Bartunek & Moch 2010, Tsoukas and Papoulias 2004) placing collective leadership in the third order [to be explored further]. Thus collective leadership is felt to be a step beyond the partnership approaches that they have experience of while working in mixed teams, and instead builds on this approach and explores the idea of leadership as a practice which emerges out of, the reflection, inquiry and deepening relationships, that grow between and amongst the people in the group.

Theme #1 - Self and the Group

One participant referred to collective leadership as ‘*the demise of I*’. She explained this as being ‘*in service to the group*’, putting the group and the task first and letting go of ego - particularly around heroic leadership problem solving endeavours.

How we work together transcends my own status. It's the balance always between the self and the group. [It is] the balance between the self and the group. [The] I and the we.

Views on advocacy vs inquiry approaches within teams and the importance of asking questions and ‘*deep*’ listening were discussed in reference to understanding the position of others and not having the same conversations time and again. There was a desire to ‘*let go*’, of historic successes and failures, as well as strongly held beliefs and feelings towards specific organisations, teams and individuals.

There has to be some input into self-awareness, unconscious bias, the importance of letting go and being ok with not knowing in order to get some different [level of] awareness

Interviewees spoke often about working in a way where one allows themselves to be open to different perspectives, this openness was felt to contribute towards a change in mind-set or even world view. Others explained it as the need to ‘*suspend judgment*’ and reflect more on any particular bias and preconceptions held that may have an effect on what is said, usual behaviours and actions. Many felt that this ‘*is the work*’ and supports a step towards positive change in light of the task in hand, and that putting the groups relational needs before their own, or even their organisations is required, in pursuit of the shared goal.

Letting go of ego, letting go of some of that sense of self for the greater good of the outcome.

Although interviewees talked about the importance of the shared goal and task, many talked about the collective leadership purpose as being about, the noticing, and paying attention, to

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how the group interact and learn together. This was felt to be of equal importance to the task and perhaps a more important outcome.

Theme #2 – The Collective Group

Participants talked about previous collaborative attempts to effect better outcomes and change, they offered insights about the collective leadership approach offering something more.

What influence can you have in a tiny group that's meeting together talking about things that you've been told to talk about, rather than meeting together with people that you are experiencing real life issues with every day and you're able to influence these issues.

Theme #3 – Beyond the Self and the Group

Participants discussed the wider system implications of collective leadership work and specifically some of the benefits they have experienced which may appear from the outside to be assumed methods of working, but are in fact, not obviously in place or supported. By utilising the networks that have been formed through collective leadership work, a catalyst of connections has been established, a pathway for professionals to support their colleagues, the community and their own selves in dealing with important, emotive and difficult work in a currently disconnected system.

Having those key system conversations where actually we're having much more ongoing communication. So to me that's not a little thing, that's a really, really, big thing, especially for a family that's waiting and needing help now. They don't have to wait five weeks to find out 'you're not getting it', you know who to get in touch with, and it might not be them but they can signpost you and they might know more about it than you.

Discussion

Collective leadership shines a light on how we work together in groups and across systems. What is perhaps worth further attention concerns the weight and priority given (from scholars and academics) to the relationships, tensions and dynamics between group members (see relational leadership theory (Ospina 2017, Uhl-Bien and Marion 2009, Uhl-Bien 2006). Furthermore focusing on privileging the dynamics of the individual and the group process above the shared goal, particularly in the early days of a collective endeavour, may be beneficial to its sustainability and benefits. This could lead to a deeper exploration into the prospect that the complexity resides not solely in the task but in how we work together in groups that cross boundaries.

Further Development of Paper

In developing the paper further, attention will be given to the literature review on public and collective leadership, summarising and discussing key findings from the public administration field as well as looking across the disciplines to include insights from leadership, change and systems studies, as for example, exploring a less heroic view of leaders and leadership does not purely reside within public services. The study, exploring perceptions and experiences of collective leadership will be fully worked through and presented with findings and a discussion section.

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