Centre For Progressive Leadership

# The Social Development of Leadership and Knowledge

**Re-thinking Research and Practice**

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# Contents

**Introduction**

How do you find something out? How might you feel in going about this task? How does this come to change your leadership and practice? We have taken these questions seriously and they form a structure of a book that will be published by Palgrave in 2013 called The Social Development of leadership and Knowledge. Experience does not follow a linear intellectual path that finally arrives at a clear destination. In fact we don't arrive; instead we are in a constant process of arriving. Multiple avenues and possibilities fleetingly emerge and close: facing us with choices, dilemmas, exclusion, panic and hope.

We draw on two contrasting districts of the city of practice – districts which are our professional homes, namely the interplay between policy-making and front-line action in Britain's National Health Service, and the recruitment of executives to senior management positions in the private, public, academic and voluntary sectors.

Intellectual lines of thought that have deeply influenced our thinking have included Ralph Stacey *at al* and Complex Responsive Process of Relating (Stacey, 2007) (Stacey, Griffin, & Shaw, 2000) and Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* (Bourdieu, Science of Science and Reflexivity, 2006). Both Bourdieu and Stacey explore themes of process and ongoingness that we strongly identify with. Stacey *et al* draw on analogies from complexity sciences as a way of exploring how people relate to reach other. This we find, particularly useful and adds to Bourdieu's contribution. Both are keen to explore the effects that decisions and actions have when amplified or muted in the wider figuration of human interaction, some of which is known and open to experience, and other interactions which are not accessible. In summary, both Stacey and Bourdieu explore, in different ways, the impact of power relations between people as a means of connecting actions and their overt and hidden consequences. It is for these reasons that we find it helpful to explore these interactions in a more temporal way, rather than overly privileging separation and objectivity.

It is in this context that we explore the connection between leadership and knowledge. Leadership literature is enormous and has almost buckled under its own weight. The question that we address is this: how does a practitioner take their own experience seriously? In doing so there is an opportunity for the practitioner to: explore their own context (or habitus as Bourdieu terms it) in acts of leadership (that require vision, courage and conflict) to change patterns of how people relate to each other and in doing do new patterns emerge in

both predictable and unpredictable ways. These new patterns form topic of conversation and knowledge between people where further opportunities for leadership develop. The foundation of leadership development and knowledge is firmly anchored to a person's own situation, a situation in which they occupy with others. We are therefore not saying that the weight of current leadership literature is wasted. Instead, it must be read and understood within the fabric of the leaders own experience. In this paper we explore some of the theoretical aspects and practicalities behind this.

**Our motivation**

Both of us completed our doctorates in 2010, neither of us came through the traditional academic route. Instead, as experienced managers *in senior role*s, we became intrigued that prescriptions of organisational change and leadership did not tally with our own experience. Indeed, actual experience was largely absent in the literature; when experience was included it was problematic. This prompted us to write a book that pays attention to how events roll out, how people respond to them and the implications this has for knowledge and leadership.

Intensified by the current global financial crisis as well as recurrent examples of egregious corporate behaviour, an important strand of debate argues that the output of business schools (notably the learning and expectations of swelling numbers of MBA graduates, and the content of books and executive education courses as well as research) has in part been damaging. In place of ethical complexity and close attention to organisational life in its non-linear detail we have taught the pseudo-scientific maximisation of shareholder value, mathematical models and 2 x 2 matrices of behaviour. Khurana (2007) traces the history: we point also to Mintzberg (2004), Ghoshal (2005) and Stacey (2010). Developing this theme is beyond the scope of this book, but strengthening practitioner research programmes in business schools so that practitioner researchers and their readers are *not* cut off from the messy complexities of organisational life has clear relevance to this debate.

**Four underpinning principles**

There a four themes weave together that connect some of the assumptions as to leadership is discussed (and the emphasis on separation between the leader from the led and experience form how one comes to understand it), how we think about our own experience, how

leadership is bound within a network of wider relations and knowedge and how all of this comes to affect our practice of leadership.

- *Emphasis on the Temporal.* Many methods of researching organisations or talking about leadership privilege an approach that takes data (figures, narrative, and accounts) and stresses a separation of the subject and object. It downplays the temporal in favour of a spatial; at least in the way that it is often described. Phrases such as 'stepping back from the data' and 'let's be objective' and 'let's see this through another lens' are not uncommon. This spatial way of thinking, particularly the implication for the un-reflexive post-hoc rationalisation, plays down the emergent feeling of ambiguity, sensemaking and conflict as individuals in a group inch forward into an uncertain future. We suggest there is merit in drawing attention to the temporal. In other words paying close attention to one's own practice and its development. This is not to say that one can be entirely 'temporal' or 'spatial'. Instead, there is an important reflexive awareness between the spatial and temporal.

- *Immersed reflexivity.* With our emphasis on the temporal, immersed reflexivity pays attention to the social process of which a person is part, a process that has no privileged position or separation from the action. Here the role of narrative is important. A person writes accounts of important occurrences close to the time of happening when post hoc rationalisation has not dimmed the ambiguity, fear, power relations between people, hope and those multiple decisions that could have been taken. In other words, paying attention to both those paradoxical processes including those of logic and emotion. Working in sets, individuals are encouraged to engage with each other's narratives and experience to enable noticing of what has not been noticed. With these insights the individual engages in the risk of unsettling patterns of relations, of doing new and different things and of encouraging others to notice and discuss them. And in doing so, knowledge develops that can be used to engage those unsaid and unrecognised ways of working.

- *Epistemic wake.* Immersed reflexivity draws attention to the game(s) that we are all participants in, games that we have a stake in - with something to gain and lose.

These are games that change and develop over time. Looked at from a distance (or from long term memory) there is clarity and linearity, and stories become reified. At the time of happening things are confused, the rules of the game can make little or no sense, other than to those involved who have a stake in the process. Reflexivity can open up new, previously unsuspected interpretations, patterns or perspectives, some of which, in the social process of the game, extend the game's meaning. Standing on the stern of a ship looking towards the horizon, one sees the wake as a clear stable white line that separates the sea. Looking downwards to the propellers the full churn and mix of the water and air becomes apparent. It is this metaphor that we use to engage with the contextual nature of knowledge as events occur, before they become fixed and distant. We believe that this is a more realistic way to describe organisational life.

- *Ongoing challenge of leadership.* The epistemic wake also extends to how we discuss leadership. Tales of leadership and characteristics of leaders are often spoken about in terms of the distant wake of linearity and certainty. What we are drawing attention to are the dilemmas, the risk, and the confusion of a leadership in terms of future direction that is seen, sensed and unknown. With knowledge there are accepted tests, at least in academia; these are: generalisability, validity and reproducibility. These tests are applied in various ways and in different fields of knowledge. Despite the enormous field of leadership literature, no such test of rigour exists. In dealing with the ongoing churn and turbulence of the everyday we offer the following: vision, courage and conflict.

**Acts of leadership from research to practice and practice to research – how a graphic example shines a light on leadership literature**

The Asian-American sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh describes in his book 'Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Crosses the Line' (2008) how his graduate studies took him into the lives of the residents of a sprawling, squalid, Chicago housing complex, the Robert Taylor Homes. Venkatesh's story begins with trying to conduct research in the Lake Park projects, a housing development a short walk from the university but in the middle of turf run

by gangs whose livelihood was selling crack cocaine. Having ventured into the estate with his clipboard, Venkatesh starts to ask his academically-approved questions:

> How does it feel to be black and poor? … Very bad, somewhat bad, neither bad nor good, somewhat good, Very good. (Venkatesh, 2008, p. 14)

and gets mugged by a gang, the Black Kings. Venkatesh's research and his relationship with the Black Kings develop together to the point where, nearly three years later, Venkatesh spends a day walking in the shoes of gang leader J. T. The story of 'Gang Leader for a Day' spans many years.

Here his journey is from researcher to practitioner, and as a practitioner how he comes to add something to research. It is our view that the practitioner has a considerable amount to offer, both to knowledge and to their leadership and the leadership of others.

Having been stopped by a gang from exploring a public housing estate with a researcher's clipboard, Venkatesh sensed possibilities which demanded courage to follow up: courage not only to face the possibilities of violence or arrest but to found his research on exposed methodological ground. As a result he saw and interpreted things which other researchers had not. His work gained an interested following, evidenced not only by his own book (Venkatesh, 2008) but by 'Freakonomics' (Levitt & Dubner, 2007). 'Freakonomics' interpreted and popularised Venkatesh's findings and in March 2012 became Amazon's best-selling book in academic sociology and second place in the theory and philosophy of economics.

The purpose is to give an interpretation of the present state of leadership discourse by tracing how, as we journey from practice to academia, this common sense notion disintegrates to the point that a management academic introducing a collection of readings on leadership writes:

> When I say I do not believe that leadership exists, I am not an agnostic in the sense that I am waiting for someone to convince me that they know what leadership is. Indeed, one of the peculiarities of the leadership literature is that there is no agreed definition of leadership nor any universal guidance on how to improve as a leader, which seems extraordinary given how much has been published on the subject. No, when I say I do not believe that leadership exists, I am an atheist. (Billsberry, 2009, p. 1)

This chapter invites attention to what happens when a theme of substantial practical importance in contemporary organisational life is subjected to the tenets of knowledge and also prepares the ground for a different illumination of leadership.

Our interest here is not to open a debate on what may constitute good leadership, but to affirm that for both of us and for many of the practical managers with whom we worked, leadership was – and remains – meaningful and important, whatever its complex and ambiguous edges. In the ordinary discussion of working life as well as at moments of special significance (such as presentations to boards), there were differences which mattered which could be, and were, described in terms of leadership. Indeed the term was overused, yet it formed an intelligible basis for actions and decisions, not least in the second author's search experience. 'Outstanding leadership' was one of the most insistent demands of clients; one which sometimes prompted surprising choices of candidates.

So in terms of that search experience, if organisations repeatedly went to the pet shop demanding 'a leader', what was usually in the basket when they left the shop? Harvard Business School Professor Rakesh Khurana has researched this question in the process of appointing chief executives to large American corporations. He points to a consistent and disturbing pattern in which expensively paid search firms do not search, neither they nor the appointing committees of boards probe and challenge candidates, and the candidates themselves are drawn from within an irrationally narrow social network. The pet in the basket is anointed as a carrier of dreams, something which requires a certain degree of inflation.

> [The] belief that there is one right person for the job is at the core of the whole process of charismatic succession. It is also a dodging of responsibility, an act of evasion that begins with directors' unwillingness to face the fact that choosing a CEO is difficult.
>
> The myth of the charismatic CEO disguises this inconvenient reality. The charismatic illusion is fostered by tales of white knights, lone rangers, and other such heroic figures whose origins lie in the fairy tales that serve a child's need to be protected from the world's dangers. When we meet this extraordinary man (and it is almost always a man) who is going to save the day, we expect to be able to recognize him. The charismatic leader is easily identified by the feelings of awe that he inspires in others. There is no need to look hard at the leader himself, let alone to question whether he is really right for the task at hand. (Khurana, Searching for a Corporate Savior: The Irrational Quest for Charismatic CEOs, 2002, pp. 208-209)

We use the dissonant image of the leader as a 'pet' caged in a basket to underline the fixity and limited range of the densely connected images which we most commonly associate with leadership (such as white knights and lone rangers). It is also an invitation to notice in a different way what is going on when organisations choose leaders: a process which is neither an end in itself nor something which admits 'right answers'.

**The discourse on leadership**

Writing on leadership has proliferated to the point where not only might one expect (or wish) the discourse to collapse under its own weight, but it is almost impossible to make a contribution without a reference to this fact. For example from page 1 of books which we will explore further:

> Although leadership research seems to be increasing exponentially we have yet to establish what it is, never mind whether we can teach it or predict its importance. (Grint, 2005, p. 1)

> Few topics in the field of management have flourished as dramatically as leadership. Each year, more than a hundred new books and thousands of articles are published on the topic. Google lists more than a billion 'hits' when the term *leadership* is entered for a search. (Conger & Riggio, 2007, p. 1)

> Most of us want to be considered a leader. Fortunately, there is a vast literature to help us. Book shops contain racks full of tomes on leadership with lessons from politicians, generals, business executives, football managers and cartoon characters, all vying for our money. (Billsberry, 2009, p. 1)

The pace is not slackening. In 2011 *Harvard Business Review* thought all of the following worth the attention of the time-poor but insight-hungry business executive. The introductory sentences are the authors' own.

- *Fire, Snowball, Mask, Movie: How Leaders Spark and Sustain Change* by Peter Fuda and Richard Badham (November). What does it take for an average manager to become a highly effective leader? There are countless books, models, and formulas for success. But the truth is that leadership transformation is deeply dependent on context;

- *The Higher Ambition Leader* by Nathaniel Foote, Russell Eisenstadt and Tobias Fredberg (September). High ambition leaders create long-term value for their companies while at the same time benefiting their communities and generating high levels of social capital;

- *Are You a Collaborative Leader?* By Herminia Ibarra and Morten Hansen (July/August). Social media and technologies have put connectivity on steroids and made collaboration more integral to business than ever, but without the right leadership, collaboration can go astray;

- *The Wise Leader* by Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi (May). In an era of increasing discontinuity, wise leadership has nearly vanished;

- *Why Leaders Don't Learn From Success* by Francesca Gino and Gary Pisano (April). What causes so many companies that once dominated their industries to slide into decline?;

- *Guilt-Ridden People Make Great Leaders* by Francis Flynn (January/February). People who are prone to guilt work harder and are perceived to be effective leaders.

This discourse did not come from nowhere. Two researchers have offered valuable historical and social interpretations of its development. In the course of filling in the missing history of a recently fashionable idea, *followership*, Susan Baker (2007) illuminates both the discourse's focus on leaders and the fact that the intellectual genesis of key ideas cannot be found by looking only at writing on leadership. To do this she draws on social change, particularly in America in the twentieth century, and the work of psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists such as Freud, Mead, Sanford and Homans, giving a particular place to social exchange theory. Ralph Stacey (2010, pp. 27-52) asks how we came to believe that leaders and managers choose an organisation's direction. Starting with Ancient Greek and mediaeval usages, Stacey locates relevant influences in scientific, economic and philosophical developments spanning several centuries, while paying particular attention to the development of scientific management and the role of business schools from the twentieth century onwards. His concern is to account for the extraordinary resilience of an idea (that leaders know what they are doing and we should do) in the face of, for example, the global financial crisis.

**Practical steps to make a difference**

The ideas are explored in detail in our book as well as the practical actions that can be used to develop leadership and knowledge.

*The kind of people who might be interested*

The ideas will appeal to people who, at a certain point in their career, ask some fundamental questions about their leadership within the social melee in which they have found themselves. They have questions left unanswered by the formulaic advice and prescriptions offered by the many books on leadership. It is aimed at people who want to work seriously with their own experience, not the abstract experience of others, so as to improve their own practice. For some this may lead to a further programme of study, such as a doctorate or master's degree, in which personal experience is going to be an important theme. And by addressing the experience of their own leadership they will have something new to say to the community that they are a part of; in other words they will be creating practical knowledge.

*Structure and inspiration for the book*

The book has a varied 'texture' and pace ranging from narratives of our experiences to detailed argument. This is intentional; the aim is to mirror the experience of everyday life. In other words, life is not a clear linear passage of events presented with clarity and offering rational choice, a presentation that can often be seen in many books on leadership. It is in the context of everyday life that leadership has to have meaning. We therefore argue that attention should focus on the practical day to day realities that people face as they interact with others– emotionally, viscerally, and intellectually and so on.

We draw inspiration from the complexity sciences. Drawing on the recent work of weather scientists and the natural sciences generally complexity provides an opportunity to consider organisational life as being non-deterministic and non-linear. It allows us to raise our heads from the post Enlightenment 'comfort' of cause and effect, linearity and certainty. Here we explore complexity though the power, or anticipated power, between people as they work together; not within discreet organisations but across the web of connections that they are part of, both knowingly and unknowingly.

*Leadership*

It can be tempting to be weary of the variety and the ease by which people offer a view into this crowded space without criteria to judge one idea from another (criteria that exists with knowledge). However, for us, leadership is both important and meaningful, whatever the complex and ambiguous edges. Between those moments of 'significance' (such as a presentation to the board) and the 'mundane' (such as 1:1 with a member of staff) there are differences that can matter, differences that can be recognised as leadership.

Instead of offering models or frameworks we emphasise the importance of the essentially contested nature by which we all have to get along with each other. It is here that acts of leadership are made in the context of unique situations that people find themselves in. The leader, in paying attention to their own practice with others, becomes more aware of the connections, interconnections, the impact they have on others and the practical effects they have. It is here that the complexity sciences form a useful analogy.

*Knowledge*

For knowledge to count as such there is a tendency to privilege the abstract, detached and universal. This can be at the expense the continually contested nature of ongoing human interaction in which logic, 'common sense', anxiety, fear and hope all play out as people face those multiple and ambiguous choices in everyday life. To us, all of this is important, not just the logical, post-hoc interpretation of the detached observer. And it is in the rigorous process of working with one's experience, as expressed in narrative, as part of a group process that valuable insights and knowledge can be gained.

*The interaction of leadership and knowledge*

As a leader engages in a process whereby they consider carefully their own experience new insights become apparent to them. Once apparent they have a choice to act differently and in doing so new patterns of interaction occur. At a practical level this might include meeting with different groups of people, engaging in different types on conversation or challenging the 'way things are done'. From this both the leader and those they interact with start to notice what has been hidden by a veil of familiarity that is shared amongst the group. A familiarity often termed as 'culture'. It is in this process that both the leader can change and develop, but also create knowledge for the group. And it is also our argument that these insights will be of value to organisations and to academics.

*In practice*

The importance of narrative has already been mentioned. This is in the context of what we have termed immersed reflexivity. A group of people, or learning set, is formed and with the support of a facilitator they draft narratives of important events. These are written close to the time of the event so as not to lose the ambiguous choices and the emotion that can quickly dissipate when a person looks back in hindsight. These narratives are shared with the set and discussed. Areas that seem obvious, 'clear cut', or not worth a mention are noticed by set members and form a focus for conversation. In noticing these and acting differently (which can in itself be a risk that needs to be carefully managed) at work relations change as do the interactions and power dynamics. This becomes available for further discussion. It is here that the opportunity arises to compare experience with accepted knowledge. This might include those unsaid customs within an organisation's culture and the accepted wisdom reflected within the professional press or in academia.

**In conclusion**

Developing the practice of leadership needs to be done within the experience of practice. Abstract ideas of leadership traits, models and stories of great people have their place, but these are secondary to what people do the dilemmas that they face as they work within a context that deeply matters to them.

It is by the process of working over an extended period of time with their own experience, in supportive groups and developing a narrative account of their journey that offers practical steps to make a difference. And a difference that the leader can recognise, articulate and share with others.

To talk about leadership development without considering the people that leaders interact with (both in terms of leading and being led) does not make sense to us. Yet much of the literature on leadership only gives a passing nod to the wider figuration of power and relations. This to us is key both in terms of leadership development and for knowledge.

In those acts of leadership that affect and change relations and power figurations between people the ability to notice those taken for granted ways of doing things starts to develop.

This is an opportunity to develop and share knowledge in the team being led, the wider organisation, the industry sector or even in academia.

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