Notes from………….Is leadership only for heroes? The context for leadership
Zoe van Zwanenberg, Chief Executive of the Scottish Leadership Foundation

The most striking fact about public service leadership is the complexity of the context and the problems our public service leaders are tasked to solve. There will be more than one person involved in decision and often more than one service. Yet we expect to hold a single individual accountable for 'delivery' of a solution.

When we move beyond the issue of services for individuals and start to think about services to and with a community then the number of voices in the discussion multiples along with the complexity of the issues being addressed.

As we know different parts of the community will have different views, each valid to those holding them. The resources for tackling the perceived problems will be limited, and the political desire for action and measurable outcomes immediate. But if the problem remains framed as a linear one with an expectation of a linear answer, then whatever actions are taken are bound to disappoint.

**Leadership and Partnership**
There is the expectation that public services should work in partnership to address such areas of complexity. This seems like common sense until you start to ask questions about leadership and power, and what they mean in the partnership context.

Our current model of leaders are based on single leaders of single organisations, armies or nation states with a focus on a single heroic leader 'driving' the whole process and acting as a central focus for everyone else's collaborative effort.

We are still applying a leadership approach that depends on either personal dominance or interpersonal leadership, yet neither approach is sustainable as it requires suppression of other people's or profession's worldviews, and this suppression always has consequences.

**The work of leadership**
In our drive to provide simple answers with clear deliverable outcomes for complex problems we have latched on to the notion that strong, effective leaders are what will make the difference.

Current belief is that the work of leadership is to define not just what needs to be done but how it will be done and by whom in a defined linear format. In this model the work of leadership is to be all knowing and to take the blame when things do not work out in accordance with the master plan.

The certainty that this type of leadership provides should then enable us to see our way out of the complex mix of dilemmas and relationships that face us. This seems to presume a straight line of cause and effect and also a simplicity of relationships between probems and solutions that our everyday experience of the world would deny.

It is also based on a very simple and value laden model of leadership – that of the leader/hero who provides direction, goals, standards and behaviours that all can follow.

If the work of leadership is to provide answers, then we are resigning ourselves to being a dependent community of followers yet reserving the right to sacrifice the leader when the answers do not address the real problem or prove unacceptable.

**Leadership as a social construct**
This prevailing model of the work of leadership is clearly in conflict with out other concerns about community engagement, staff and citizen participation, and the development of co-production approaches to service change. It is also predicated on machine age thinking about social relationships, and most critically leaves responsibility and accountability for outcomes in the laps of the few.

If we change our paradigm of leadership to that of a social construct then the whole process of leadership and the role of the leader changes dramatically. It moves from;

- being focused on the personal qualities of an individual
to
- being a form of meaning and making sense that happens over time and involves the whole community.

In this paradigm, leadership emerges from a process of negotiation among different actors with different perspectives until an individual or a group emerges as the most influential.

This process is dependent on 'people with differing views using the principles of dialogue and collaborative learning to create spaces where a shared common purpose can be achieved while the diversity of perspectives is preserved and valued.

Leadership happens when people in a community create a shared understanding of their mutual and moral obligations so that their common cause is realised. Thus any group of persons attempting to accomplish goals collectively face three crucial tasks:
- setting direction
- creating and maintaining commitment and
- adapting to the challenges that appear on the way.

These three elements of the work of leadership are recognisable from all leadership texts: what is important in the social construct is that they are the responsibility of the community or group and not the sole prerogative of the individual leader. They are based, as well, on a presumption of shared learning about issues as they emerge, rather than a presumption that pre-set goals and directions will remain constant over time.

**So what do leaders do?** What is the role of the positionally defined leaders already in place?

If their role is no longer to provide all the answers, then it must be to provide and hold the space that enables the communities or groups within the community to find their own way forward. Their role then is to ask the hard questions, to challenge groups and individuals to think for themselves about the challenges.

Heifitz identifies this work with reference to a number of key principles:
- **Identifying the challenge** – in his terms it is an adaptive challenge that requires people to shift their understanding of the problem and find new ways of making sense of it so that they can find better ways of responding.
- **Regulating distress** – this temperature taking is critical, as we know that people who are unduly stressed revert to known habits and responses or are frozen in place.
- **Directing disciplined attention to the issues** – this work ensures that the group maintains focus and does not engage in distractions or avoidance techniques that can eat into time and energy and give the impression of progress. This requires the leader to keep asking the hard questions.
- **Giving the work back to the people** – this may range from orchestrating conflict to gain focus on the real challenge or identifying the key people to involve in the work but it clearly does not mean taking the decisions to oneself or setting the boundaries for the group too tightly.

This does give a very different flavour to the role of the leader and the work of leadership. However, it does question the legitimacy of position, as defined by hierarchy, as a pre-requisite for leadership.

The only advantage that position or seniority gives you in this construct is that whilst we are all struggling to understand and work with this social construct, an individual with power and authority can set the stage for the principles to be put in place. They just have to remember to let go!

**How to prepare leaders for such work**
If we are to understand the work of leadership as a social construct and the role of the leader as part enabler, part questioner, part pace setter and part sense maker, then we have to develop our leaders in different ways. The traditional business school model of

the leader setting strategic direction to solve a series of identifiable problems, deploying sophisticated decision making and problem solving techniques and perhaps a well-constructed consultative process, becomes obsolete.

Heifitz's key principles appear to be the core capabilities for our new leaders. They are not the capabilities so often associated with heroes, though to deploy them in our target driven, delivery focused world does require courage. They are however, the capabilities of responsible leaders.

Instead of seeking to develop leadership by developing individual leaders, this way of looking at leadership – as an unfolding of ever more involving and complex knowledge principles – helps us to see how leadership can be developed as a systemic capacity: the capacity of a system to accomplish leadership tasks at various levels of complexity, bringing in increasing numbers of increasingly responsible people.

Leadership then is not just for heroes, but social heroism may be part of the toolkit of all people engaged in work of leadership rather in the creation of leaders.


For more information see The Scottish Leadership Foundation, www.slf-scotland.co.uk and Leadership without easy answers, Ron Heifitz, Harvard University press 1994