

# 'Whole systems' leadership: Towards a conceptual model

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## Abstract

The paper proposes a 'conceptual model' that seeks to integrate current approaches to leadership in public services. In relation to leadership, it draws a distinction between 'what' a leader does in her/his role, and 'how' s/he performs that role. It goes on to consider the kinds of problem ('wicked', 'tame', and 'crisis') with which leaders are faced, and the different kinds of political, strategic, and managerial roles that they occupy. It is argued that a combination of competent leadership, enacted in an engaging way, is crucial to success in the different roles and contexts.

## Introduction

To suggest that leadership is an area of study in which there are as many theories as theorists, is something of a truism. However, what is also true is that many individuals and organisations are actively seeking ways in which different perspective and approached can be integrated. Here, it is possible to identify general themes and areas of focus, such as (in alphabetical order): - 'charismatic', 'civic', 'command-and-control', 'competency-based'; 'emotionally intelligent'; 'engaging'; 'ethical'; 'managerial'; 'operational', 'political'; 'strategic'; 'transactional'; 'transformational'; and 'visionary' (e.g., Alimo-Metcalf & Alban-Metcalf, 2001, 2005; Bennington & Hartley, 2008; CIPD, 2008; FRS, 2004; Home Office, 2002, 2004; Iles & Macaulay, 2007; Kahn, 1990; MacLeod & Clarke, 2009; NHS, 2002; Northouse, 2007; Papalexandris & Galanaki, 2009; Robinson, Perryman & Hayday, 2004). The more recent literature has introduced concepts such as: - the 'difficult stuff', referring to performance management (e.g., Wellings & Schweyer, 2007); 'wicked', 'tame', and 'crisis' problems (e.g., Grint, 2005; Heifetz, 1994); and the need to give honest feedback (e.g., Robinson & Hayday, 2009), particularly when dealing with staff from minority backgrounds (e.g., Alban-Metcalf, 2004a&b).

Furthermore, among the 'new paradigm' approaches (Bryman, 1996) there is evidence of that transformational leadership (Bass, 1998) may have a differential impact in different contexts (Mitchell & Boyle, 2009). Also, Bartone, Eid, Johnsen, Laberg and Snook (2009) presented evidence to suggest that leader behaviour in different contexts is predicted by different combinations of extroversion, conscientiousness, hardiness, and mental abilities, and a trend for social judgement. This evidence corresponds to that presented by the 'situational' and 'contingency' theories of Fielder, Vroom and Yetton, and Hersey and Blanchard (Northouse, 2007), and of leader-follower interaction (e.g., Bahl, Gulati & Ansari, 2009; Lührmann & Eberl, 2007; van Breukelen, Schyns & Le Blanc, 2006;).

## Real World Group Research

When analysing what leadership involves in practice, it is also valuable to distinguish between what a leader does, and how s/he does it.

### The 'what' and the 'how'

The 'what' of leadership refers to the competencies or skills that a leader has to perform in their particular role, while the 'how' of leadership relates to 'leadership style', the way in which a leader interacts with her/his colleagues.

Relevant to the what/how distinction is the simile offered by Bolden and Gosling (2006), when they wrote,

“a competency framework could be considered like sheet music, a diagrammatic representation of the melody. It is only in the arrangement, playing and performance, however, that the piece truly comes to life.”  
(Bolden & Gosling, 2006).

In many cases, the what of leadership is encapsulated in one of the many 'competency frameworks'. However, in spite of being almost ubiquitous, competency frameworks have recently come in for considerable criticism on a number of theoretical grounds (e.g., Bolden & Gosling, 2006; Hollenbeck, McCall & Sitler, 2006), and in relation to their impact, Hollenbeck et al. (2006) wrote,

“we see little evidence that these systems, in place for years now, are producing more and better leaders in organizations”.

- **Competencies and qualities**

A source of confusion that emerges in more than one of the leadership competency frameworks currently in use in the public sector is between 'competencies' and 'qualities'. In the present context, qualities may be defined as, “those cognitive and emotional characteristics of an individual that are essential pre-requisites for appropriate managerial or leadership behaviour”. However, merely the possession of qualities is not of itself sufficient for any kind of leadership behaviour ((Alban-Metcalf & Alimo-Metcalf, 2009; CIPD, 2008).

To illustrate this point, the personal quality of being 'resilient' or 'tenacious' is a requirement of someone who shows competency of 'planning' to achieve results, just as 'effective communication' is a pre-requisite for 'working in a team'. However – importantly – showing resilience or tenacity does not guarantee achieving results, any more than possessing the quality of being 'emotional intelligent' on its own ensures effective team work, or having 'integrity' ensures that someone can be a successful finance director. Put simply, the 'formula' would seem to be that shown in Figure 1. In other words, qualities (and values) are necessary, but not sufficient for success.



**Figure 1: Relationship between Personal Qualities & Values, Competent & Engaging Leadership, Staff Engagement & Wellbeing, and Performance**

- **Leadership style**

The relevance of leadership style came to be recognised most fully through the work of the 'new paradigm' (Bryman, 1996) models of the late 1970s and early '80s, which identified concepts such as 'charismatic', 'transactional' and 'transformational', and 'visionary' leadership (e.g., Bass, 1998; Conger, 1989; House, 1977; Sashkin, 1988). Of these, perhaps the most differentiated is that of Bass and Avolio (e.g., Bass, 1998), which distinguished the style of being: - transformational – concerned with encouraging staff to act for the greater good; transactional – involving a rewards and punishments, or 'carrot-and-stick' approach; and laissez-faire – which constitutes an abrogation of leadership responsibility.

The strengths and weaknesses of these approaches have been discussed on conceptual and methodological grounds (e.g., Northouse, 2007; Yukl, 1999). On the positive side: - they constitute models of leadership which address the issue of change, and thus constituted a 'sea change' in thinking about leadership; they analysed leadership behaviours in ways that have instant appeal, thereby affording them face validity; and the behaviours that many of them assess are significantly linked to positive attitudes to work, which is used as a measure of their criterion validity.

The conceptual criticisms include: - that they are based on notions of 'distant', often 'heroic' leadership; that they treat leadership as a personality trait; that they are elitist; and that, in the absence of criteria to judge the quality of actions that are taken, they are open to abuse. 'Visionary and 'transformational' leadership are seen to have the potential for abuse as they are concerned with changing people's values and moving them to a new vision, while the 'transformational' leadership has been criticised for lacking conceptual clarity. Emphasis on the 'charismatic' characteristics of leaders has come in for criticism from a number of sources (e.g., Furnham, 2005); indeed, following unedifying events such as the fall of Enron and Worldcom, in which flaws in the personal characteristics of those occupying leadership roles has come to the fore (e.g., Tourrish & Vatcha, 2005), there is a growing awareness of what has come to be described as the 'dark side of charisma' (Hogan, Raskin, & Fazzini, 1990).

## Real World Group Research

Methodologically, criticisms relate to the non-inclusive nature of the samples on which the theories were based. With the exception of one Black manager in Bass' sample of 70 senior managers, the populations have been exclusively white male senior executives. Furthermore, in most cases, the methodology adopted was ask top managers themselves why they felt they were successful. What we know of self-ratings is that, at best, they are best regarded as aspirational, at worst, delusory.

Also, although there is evidence criterion validity as reflected in significant correlations with measures of subordinates attitudes to work (referred to above), and also wellbeing at work (e.g., Alimo-Metcalfe, Alban-Metcalfe, Bradley, Mariathan, & Samele, 2008; Bass, 1998), the only links with organisational performance are based on subjective data, e.g., rated organisational citizenship behaviour; team performance (e.g., van Breukelen, Schyns & Le Blanc, 2006).), but not objective data (see Alimo-Metcalfe, Alban-Metcalfe & Bradley, 2010, for a fuller discussion).

Dissatisfaction with such approaches led Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe (2001) to undertake research into the nature of 'nearby' leadership, using a Grounded Theory approach and involving an inclusive sample of over 4,000 managers and professionals in public and private sector organisations. The findings, which were replicated independently among 1,100 police officers and staff (Home Office, 2004), led to the development of a model of 'engaging' leadership.

### Engaging leadership

Engagement at work was defined by Kahn (1990) as the

“harnessing of organizational members' selves to their work role. In engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during their role performance”,

In similar vein, employee engagement has been defined as

“a positive attitude held by the employee towards the organisation and its values. An engaged employee is aware of business context, and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organisation.” (Robinson, Perryman & Hayday, 2004)

On the basis of their empirical, inclusive study of leadership, Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe (2001) defined engaging leadership as

“leadership that has a powerful effect on the motivation, self-confidence, self-efficacy, or performance, of staff.”

What we know from empirical research is that attitudes to work, such as job satisfaction, can have a significant impact on organisational performance (Patterson, Warr & West, 2004; Xenikou & Simosi, 2005), as can an engaging style of leadership (Alimo-Metcalfe et al., 2009; CIPD, 2008). And, in terms of staff engagement being an imperative, as Wellings and Schweyer (2007) pointed out, the global war for talent is “about fighting for the hearts, minds and commitment of employees at all levels”.

## Real World Group Research

Also, as Robinson and Hayday (2009) found, engagement is a characteristic found among leaders, at different levels and in different roles, managerial, strategic and political.

Among the engaging leadership behaviours of middle-senior managers, one characteristic was the development of good internal networks, with many contacts within their organisation; external networking, however, was less common (Robinson & Hayday, 2009). This, however, is the kind of networking that is essential if they are to move up to the next tier of management, where cross-agency and partnership working are requirements within public sector organisations, just as business-to-business interaction is a characteristic of successful performance in the private sector.

In practical terms, engaging leadership can be thought of as operating in the four dimensions of: - 'engaging with individuals'; 'engaging with the organisation'; 'engaging all stakeholders', internal and external; and under-pinning each of these, 'engaging ethical values' – the '4 Es' of leadership (RWG, 2009a).

### Leadership roles in public service

Figure 2 seeks to offer a conceptual model of relationships between the different roles occupied by leaders in public service.

The model is predicated on the what/how distinction referred to above, such that, when a leader is acting in one of these roles, s/he will be enacting certain competencies or skills. Many of these, such as 'organisation' and 'planning' are generic, others, such as 'strategic thinking' and 'whole systems thinking' are mostly commonly associated with leaders performing the first three of these roles. This said, as Wellings and Schweyer (2007) pointed out, if organisational talent is to be managed effectively, managers at lower levels ought to be encouraged and enabled to adopt a strategic, and even a whole systems, perspective.

## Real World Group Research

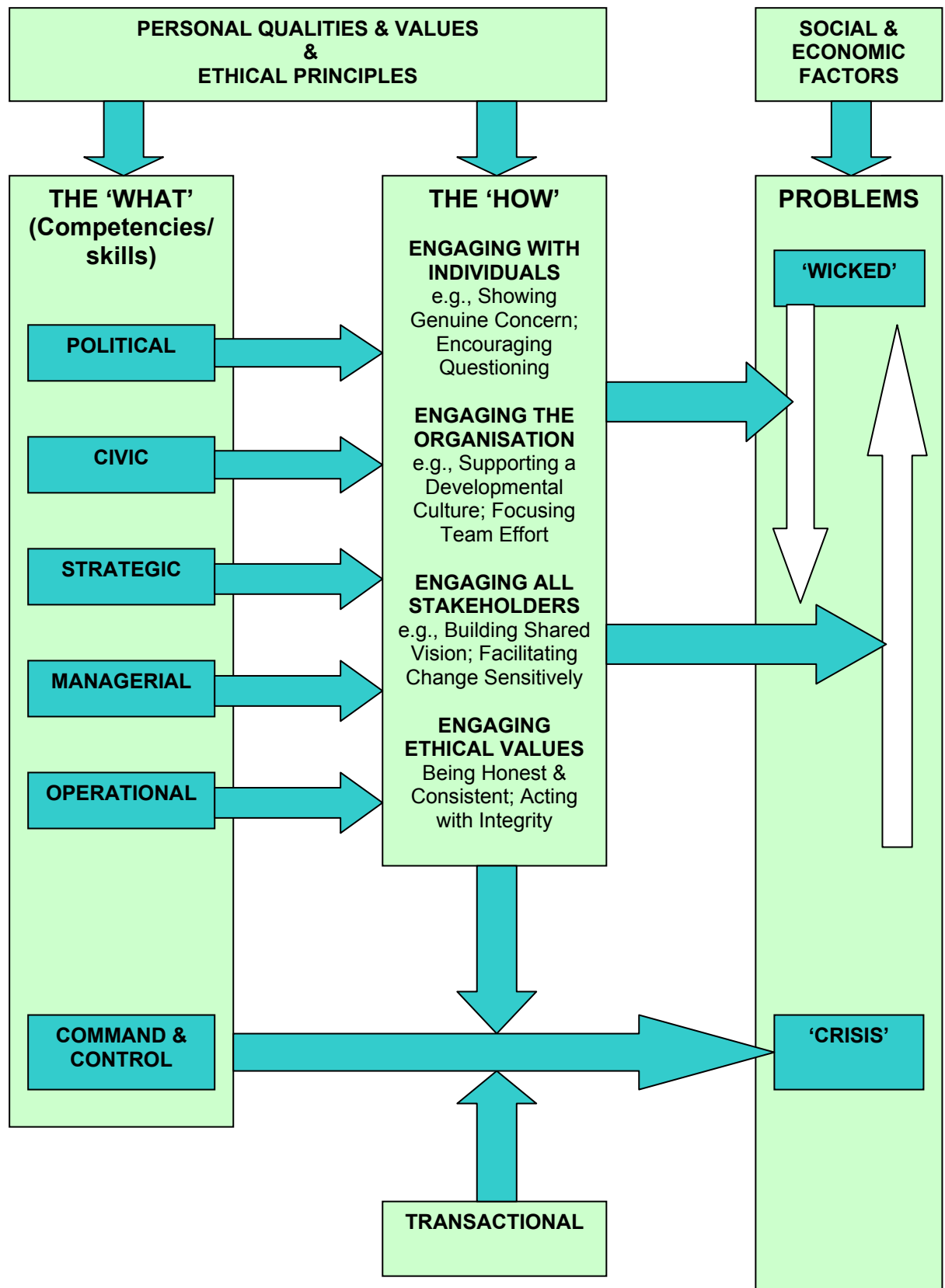


Figure 2 : Relationship between leadership roles and types of problem

## Real World Group Research

In relation to Figure 1, it is argued that the pre-requisites for leadership in the public sector are appropriate personal qualities and values of individual leaders and organisations, which are based on, and which operate according to, ethical principles (Iles & Macaulay, 2007). The left hand column seeks to articulate the principal roles in which leadership is enacted, while the right hand column seeks to relate the nature and order of difficulty of the kinds of issue with which leaders at different levels and in different roles are faced.

### • **Kinds of problem**

The kinds of problems with which leaders are faced can be thought of as being along a continuum from 'wicked' or 'adaptive' to 'tame' or 'technical'.

- 'wicked' or 'adaptive' problem are those which exhibits one or more of the following characteristics: - complex; often intractable; novel, and without an apparent solution; high level of uncertainty; polycentric; multi-causal; dynamic; inter-active; adaptive; no 'right' or 'wrong' answers, only better or worse outcomes; and solutions often generate more problems.
- 'tame' or 'technical' problems are typically: - simple or, if complicated, are still resolvable; likely to have occurred before; limited degree of uncertainty; structured; uni-causal; and involve 'mechanical' cause-effect relationships.

A third kind of problem is referred to as a 'crisis' problem.

- 'crisis' problems characteristically: - require an urgent response to an actually or potentially serious consequences; have limited time for decision-making and action; and uncertainty is managed through clear decisions (Grint, 2005; Heifetz, 1994).

### • **The nature of the different roles**

The nature of the different leadership roles, and the contexts in which leaders operate, can be summarised as follows: -

- Political – actions undertaken by individuals and groups within or inter-acting with Westminster, and central government departments and agencies. These involve members of parliament, senior civil servants, and senior members of civic organisations. Many of the problems they are presented with can be described as 'wicked' or 'adaptive', though others can be described as more or less 'tame'; some are 'crisis' problems, which require command-and-control. In the context of analysing the Northern Ireland Peace Process, Gormley-Heenan (2006) coined the phrase 'chameleonic leadership'. While not advocating it, she saw as "having a degree of synonymy with situational leadership in so far as both acknowledge that leaders' perceptions of themselves, the situation at hand, and other factors such as stress and mood, affect leadership behaviour.
- Civic – actions undertaken by individuals groups of elected and appointed representatives, and Chief Executives and senior officers, in areas that include : - local and regional authorities; NHS trusts; police authorities; schools, colleges and universities. Some of the problems they are presented with are 'wicked', though many are 'tame'; some are 'crisis' problems, requiring command and control.

## Real World Group Research

- Strategic – actions undertaken by individuals and groups with responsibility to establish and oversee the implementation of strategies designed to achieve the organisation's the mission and the vision of how this can be achieved. Such actions are undertaken by Chief Executives and senior officers, working both as individuals and as members of senior management teams. Although some of the problems they are presented are 'wicked', the majority of relatively 'tame'; some are 'crisis' problems, requiring command and control.
- Managerial – actions undertaken by individuals and groups with responsibility to ensure the implementation of strategies by establishing and monitoring effective systems and processes. Such actions are undertaken by managers and professionals occupying a middle management role. The problems with which they are presented are 'tame' or 'technical'; some are 'crisis' problems, requiring command and control.
- Operational – actions undertaken by individuals and groups with responsibility for front-line delivery of services. Such actions are undertaken by managers and professionals occupying a middle-junior management role. The problems with which they are presented are 'tame' or 'technical'; some are 'crisis' problems, requiring command and control.
- Command-and-control – this category refers to individuals who can, in principle, be all any of the five levels described above. An example of such an action by someone in a political category would be the assumption of the 'Gold Command' role in a situation involving a major incident of civil unrest, such as a riot. An operational example would be a Watch Manager directing fire fighters and the public in the event of a serious incident.

Leadership in each of the first three roles has, as a requirement, to involve 'whole systems' thinking (e.g., Bennington & Hartley, 2009). This involves the kinds of leadership behaviour that Crossan, Vera and Nanjad (2009) describe as 'transcendent leadership': the kind of leadership that can cope with dynamic environments. For them, a strategic leader is one "who leads within and amongst the levels of self, others, and organization", where leadership of organization is seen as comprising "the alignment of three interrelated areas: environment, strategy, and organization".

### Leadership in practice

What the model suggests is that, in each of the first five roles identified in Figure 2, in order to be effective, the way in which leaders approach different kinds of problem, constitutes the enactment of particular competencies or skills (the 'what') in a more or less engaging way (the 'how').

## Real World Group Research

- **Evidence of effectiveness**

There is now consistent evidence from survey data and case studies of staff operating at all levels in organisations, and from empirical research, that an engaging style of leadership has a positive effect not only on staff attitudes and wellbeing at work, but also on organisational performance. Thus, Sirota Survey Intelligence (2006), Towers Perrin (2006), and Watson-Wyatt (2006) reported the results of large-scale surveys, conducted in the US, which presented evidence of a positive relationship between staff engagement and a range of financial and other performance indicators. There are corresponding survey and case study data for local authorities (Robinson & Hayday, 2009), and case study data for a local authority, an NHS trust, a university, and a rail company in the UK (Alimo-Metcalfe & Bradley, 2008; CIPD, 2008). These findings are consistent with those reported by Collins (2001) in his book 'Good to great'.

Alimo-Metcalfe and colleagues (2007; 2010) undertook a longitudinal study into the relationship between leadership and staff and organisational performance, among multi-professional teams working in the NHS. They found a statistically significant cause-effect relationship between engaging leadership behaviour and both staff attitudes and wellbeing at work, and team performance, measured in terms of productivity, even allowing for the effect of contextual factors. Thus, there is a growing recognition of the importance of acting in ways in which cause staff to become engaged in their work (e.g., MacLeod & Clarke, 2009), based on survey, case study, and empirical evidence.

Returning to the what/how distinction, on the basis of a review of the literature, Alban-Metcalfe and Alimo-Metcalfe (2009) concluded that competencies are necessary but not sufficient for effective leadership. What is required is for leaders to perform competently, in an engaging way.

However, while there is a plethora of competency or skills frameworks, with a very few exceptions, one being the Fire & Rescue Service 'PQAs', most fail to differentiate the requirements of leaders in different operational, managerial, or strategic roles. Also, again with even fewer exceptions, one being the 'Board Leadership Quality 360' (RWG, 2009b), used by the Audit Commission, another being the 'Whole Systems Leadership 360' (RWG, 2009c), the leadership frameworks do not address the particular skills and engaging behaviours required of those leaders with civic and political roles and responsibilities.

- **Whole systems learning**

Consistently with the ideas articulated by Yukl (2009), the processes by which whole systems leadership is effected are through organisational, team or group learning. In order to achieve whole systems solutions, the focus on dyadic approaches to leadership needs to give way to understanding of how multiple leaders interact. Thus, although the influence of individuals remains relevant, what is more important is the ways in which multiple leaders influence each other, and impact on groups, teams, and organisations. Here, what is required is a new conceptual framework (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2005; Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey, 2007; Yukl, 2008), and approaches based on evidence of the nature of learning in teams (Berson, Nemanich, Waldman, Galvin & Keller, 2006). An example of a conceptual framework

## Real World Group Research

that describes organisational learning is the distinction between exploration and exploitation (Benner & Tushman, 2003; March, 1999). Exploration “involves finding innovative products, services, processes, or technology”, while exploitation “involves learning how to make incremental improvements in existing products, services, or processes” (Yukl, 2009). However, they are not separate, unrelated processes, and both are necessary for whole systems learning. For such learning to be productive, the leaders need to engage with one another.

- **What about the ‘difficult stuff’?**

This concept is usually equated with tackling poor performance, and as the Robinson & Hayday (2009) research on engaging leaders, which reported that,

“All the managers [in their sample] had, at some point in their careers, delivered bad news ... [but the] consensus was that honesty and openness was essential, along with empathy and a demonstration that the manager had an understanding of possible impact on staff”.

They went on to observe that this must, however, be accompanied by “doing one’s homework and following proper procedures”, particularly if the outcome is dismissal.

In terms of the what/how distinction, then, performance management requires a combination of competent behaviours, such as ensuring clarity of objectives, time-scales, and criteria for judging success, along with engaging behaviours, such as creating a supportive, developmental culture, and providing coaching and/or mentoring, as required. In other words, as Robinson and Hayday (2009) pointed out, although performance management is sometimes associated with a competency-based or transactional form of managerial leadership, it is not limited to managerial leadership, and should also be practised by leaders in a political or strategic role.

Furthermore, executives and senior managers of successful US and Canadian companies see being held accountable for employee engagement and retention as one of the two top requirements of leaders at all levels. The other was the management of a more diverse workforce (Wellings & Schweyer, 2007).

- **What about ‘crisis’ situations?**

As noted above, ‘crisis’ situations present problems which (1) require an urgent action; (2) have actually or potentially serious consequences; (3) allow only limited time for decision-making and action; and (4) are managed through clear decisions. The last of these should be qualified by saying that they are managed effectively through clear and appropriate decisions. It is self-evident that any crisis can end in a more or less satisfactory way, and the description ‘satisfactory’ is open to a wide range of interpretations.

This said, the criterion for determining ‘effectiveness’ and ‘appropriateness’ should refer to both the process and the outcome. Thus, the Justice System in the UK is judged by whether it follows ‘due process’, rather than whether or not an individual judgement is correct. Applying this to a situation involving a riot in a prison, what is crucial is that the person in Bronze, Silver or Gold Command (1) is open to receiving all the relevant information, (2) is open to gaining information about any change in circumstances, as and when that occurs, and (3) acts decisively and with appropriate

## Real World Group Research

expedition. Here, (3) requires a transactional style of leadership; commands issued must be followed. However, in relation to (1), 'due process' requires engaging leadership behaviours such that colleagues and others feel enabled to make their knowledge and understanding of the situation available to the decision-maker, thus presenting her/him with as complete a picture as possible. The same kind of engaging leadership is required in relation to (2), if 'due process' is to be followed. The person in command must ensure that they are open to receiving up-dated information. In other words, command-control situations require a combination of engaging and transactional behaviours.

### Flow

The concept of 'flow', which was developed by Csikszentmihályi in 1975, was described by him as "being completely involved in an activity for its own sake" (1998). It corresponds to a state of mental equilibrium between skill level and challenge level. In the present context, it can be thought of as corresponding to equilibrium between level of competency or skill required and level of engagement in a task. Thus, as leaders progress from operational to strategic, and from strategic to political roles, their skill-set must change; what must remain constant, however, is their commitment to engaging those with whom they work.

However, the sad reality, according to Wellings & Schweyer (2007), is that only 13-28% of employees are passionate about their job and their organisation, while Towers Perrin (2006) have suggested that 15% of staff are highly engaged, 65% of staff are willing to be engaged, and 20% of staff are disengaged. If these figures are to be trusted, then the task of increasing engagement will, on average, involve almost two-thirds of those for whom leaders have a responsibility.

### Leadership development

The kind of leadership development that is required for a whole systems approach is radically different from the traditional approach, much criticised by Bolden and Gosling (2006), Hollenbeck et al. (2006), and others. A more appropriate structure is that summarised in Figure 3.

In the traditional approach the emphasis is on development activities that are focused on an individual or group of individuals, participating operating as independent agents (Bennington & Hartley, 2008). The starting point is a theory of leadership, which is most commonly based on a competency framework, and the developmental activities are undertaken at a retreat (conference centre or management centre). The result can often be that the individual participants benefits by becoming more self-aware, and being able to perform certain actions more efficiently and effectively. In other words, there is an increase in 'human capital'. However, such capital is not necessarily available to the organisation as a whole (e.g., Alban-Metcalfe, Alban-Metcalfe & Alimo-Metcalfe, 2009).

## Real World Group Research

| <b>Figure 3: 'Whole Systems' Leadership Development</b>              | <b>Traditional, competency-based approach</b>      | <b>Engaging, 'whole systems' approach</b>   |
|--|--|---|
| <b>Focus of attention</b>  | <b>The individual</b>                              | <b>The workgroup or the team</b>  |
| <b>Starting point</b>  | <b>Theory</b>                                      | <b>Particular problems</b>  |
| <b>Contents</b>  | <b>Individual-focused developmental activities</b> | <b>Current and future practice</b><br><b>Activities in which the focus is on</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>identifying specific problems</b></li> <li>• <b>proposing appropriate action</b></li> </ul>  |
| <b>Location</b><br><b>Method of working</b>                          | <b>A retreat</b><br><b>Individual focused</b>      | <b>The front-line</b><br><b>Team working based on</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>trust &amp; mutual respect</b></li> <li>• <b>valuing of others' contribution</b></li> <li>• <b>critical analysis</b></li> <li>• <b>rigorous reflection on experience</b></li> <li>• <b>engaging leadership</b></li> </ul> |
| <b>Result</b>  | <b>Increase in human capital</b>                   | <b>Increase in human &amp; social capital</b>   |
| <b>Based on the 'Warwick Model' (Bennington &amp; Hartley, 2009)</b> |  |   |

In contrast, a model of leadership that is predicated on adopting an engaging style of leadership, that is, leadership that involves 'leading competently, in an engaging way' is more suited to developing 'whole systems' leadership. Here, the focus of attention is the team or working group, and the starting point is particular problems that have to be addressed, and/or analysis and evaluation relevant to current and future practice, in 'real live' situations and contexts. Appropriately, the principal location is the front-line, though this does not preclude the need for time spend away. The focus is on groups or teams working together. In order to be optimally effective, working relationships must be based on trust of and mutual respect for each of the participants, and valuing of others' contributions. The content of what is discussed is subject to critical analysis and rigorous reflection on, and evaluation of, past experience, while the most effective style of leadership is one that causes all participants to be fully engaged (Alban-Metcalf et al., 2009; CIPD, 2008; McCallum & O'Connell, 2009). In this way, benefits will be realised for organisations and communities, resulting in an increase in 'social capital', which has been defined as

"the goodwill available to individuals or groups. Its source lies in the structure and content of the actor's social relations. Its effects flow from the information, influence, and solidarity it makes available to the actor" (Adler & Knon, 2002).

## Real World Group Research

### Conclusion

According to Robinson and Hayday (2009), senior managers' views of what constitutes an engaging manager, correspond with the findings of Alimo-Metcalfe et al. (2007; 2009), and of Wellings & Schweyer (2007). These include: - becoming more strategic, less task-focus; tackling poor performance and difficult behaviour; focusing on clarity of expectations, objectives, explanations and feedback; adopting a methodical, consistent and phased approach to managing poor performance; using interpersonal skills of empathy, understanding, communication and persuasion when dealing with difficult people; being straight forward and honest when breaking bad news; and recognising and developing high performers.

To use a well-worn phrase, it isn't rocket science: the key to success, in whatever the role, and whatever the context, can be summarised as 'leading competently, in an engaging way'.

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