

It really is all about relationships: a relational approach to developing leadership

Brigid Russell, 7th August 2020

A note on perspective

My intention in writing this paper is to share a practitioner's perspective on an approach to developing leadership which has at its heart relationships and a sense of community. It is based on the live and unfolding experiences of designing and facilitating a programme of leadership development in health and care in Scotland over the past 2 years as part of project lift.ⁱ The programme is called leadership³ ("leadership cubed") reflecting that leadership happens in the three inter-connected areas of self, team, and system.

I acknowledge that I am writing this from the somewhat privileged position of a white, heterosexual, 'middle class' self-employed professional. As much as I am committed to values of equality, diversity, and fairness, I need to own that my position may influence the assumptions I hold. As the facilitator and coach alongside each leadership³ cohort, it is my live work to remain alert to how my own background influences shape my perspective.

It is all about our relationships

When we set out in 2018 to develop a 'programme', we did not describe it as *relational* leadership development at the time.ⁱⁱ Over the past two years, though, we have come to realise more and more that it is the relationships between people and the connections within our communities which really matter.

It is well recognised that the complex and pressing challenges facing our society and the public sector in Scotland mean that we all need to work alongside each other in a much more connected, collaborative, and collective way - within our communities, and between organisations in the third, statutory, and private sectors. This collaborative intent is at the heart of the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework,ⁱⁱⁱ and captured in the spirit of the project lift ethos.^{iv} This is why our approach to developing leadership is all about enabling learning in practice and from practice. It is our belief that the best learning happens through our live experiences, our relationships with each other, and through making sense of and reflecting on our experiences.

As the Covid-19 situation has unfolded over the past six months or so, we have seen the power of relationships and sense of community coming even more to the fore; and, we have seen the many deeply ingrained inequalities in our society further exposed. In those areas where time and careful effort had already been invested in nurturing connections across communities, the emergency response has been facilitated and supported by the trusting relationships already in place.

Within our health and care organisations, the early days of the pandemic response demonstrated powerfully the importance of a common sense of purpose. There have been many examples of highly effective team-working, mutual support, and the preparedness to work flexibly and collaboratively within and across teams.

“We have predominantly seen the emergence of behaviours which are principle-led, rather than rules based, cemented by solidarity rather than compliance, less defensive, more can-do, kinder, more emotionally responsive, personal and human...
New relationships have been made. Existing connections which might have been distant or transactional have become warmer and more human.” David Robinson^v

Across both groups currently engaged in the leadership³ programme, people have actively supported each other throughout the pandemic response, getting to know each other more as whole people during these extraordinary times. We have kept the learning alive by connecting virtually, and sharing our experiences along the way. Through individual and collective reflection, we have been noticing what is working and what is still getting in the way of working well across our systems. We have also had the opportunity to share our reflections on what needs to change across health and care, as part of influencing the Scotland-wide recovery and renewal phases beyond the initial response to Covid-19.

We have stayed connected, and further enriched our relationships, through openly sharing ideas, knowledge, and experiences. Rather than viewing them as ‘by-products’, I believe that these deepening relationships and the creation of community and connection are essential to our learning. This is the living embodiment of relational leadership development.

It’s about making the most of our assets, and understanding power and identity

Imagine if we already had all the skills, know-how, and experience we need for change across the system, throughout our communities, and in our organisations. We wouldn’t find them in one person, or group of leaders, at the top of the hierarchy, though. We would find all the skills and assets across our communities, spread throughout our teams, and at all levels of our organisations. Surely, then, the practice of collaboration and the ‘task’ of leadership would be to appreciate and make the most effective use of this rich combination of lived experience, skill, knowledge, and intelligence, wherever it comes from – in service of a common purpose?

We need to be much more honest with ourselves about power and identity, and be prepared to shift our perceptions of both. There are disparities in power between citizens and statutory authorities, between people who access services and people who deliver them, between the people who work across our statutory and third sector services, and between ‘central’ and ‘local’ governmental bodies. The reality is that professional and ‘expert’ identities are still given more prominence in society, over ‘lived experience’.^{vi} Within our organisations, too, we still tend to recognise and ‘reward’ commitment to profession and area of expertise more than the commitment to working collaboratively, across boundaries, and for the common cause.

Rather than identify ourselves by profession, area of expertise, or job title, what if we were all able to see ourselves as people with a shared sense of purpose? Before we can truly be alongside each other in our communities, do we not need to understand more about what really matters to each of us, our perceptions of purpose, and our areas of concern? Only

then can we all rethink what we are doing in public services, and whether it is all still fit for purpose.

In this sense, we need to view leadership as being about much more than a formal role or position in a hierarchy. It is not about professional expertise and technical solutions. Rather leadership is about working in and alongside communities, and making connections across the system; ‘starting where people are’, as Hilary Cottam^{vii} would challenge us to do. It is in the relationships between people, and in the spaces in-between different parts of a system. It’s in our readiness to ‘give up control’, to step aside, and to create the spaces in which lived experience and collective intelligence can come into their own. And this means that we need to be “more skilled in humble inquiry”, and committed to developing relationships “based on curiosity and interest in the other person” (to quote Edgar Schein^{viii}).

It’s about how we relate to each other, and how we develop our relationships

Leadership in a complex system like health and care is about much more than the activities and accountabilities of a few senior leaders in formal positions in the hierarchy. It’s more about “leader-as-host” rather than “leader-as-hero” (as Margaret Wheatley describes it^{ix}), where leadership is exercised by people at all levels of the system, informally as well as through formal roles. It is about letting go of the need to be the ‘expert’ with the perfect solution, since there are no easy technical solutions to complex issues.

What if we don’t need to become expert in any more ‘clever’ theories or models of leadership? What if we just need to practice consistently what we already know makes sense? That everything that we do across society, and throughout our public services, is necessarily inter-connected and inter-dependent. That we build trusting relationships through listening to each other, through exercising humility and empathy, and by showing compassion to each other. That we can achieve so much more through valuing each other’s contribution, seeking to understand our diverse perspectives, and through the strength of our teams.

While we undoubtedly need people with specific technical knowledge and professional expertise to fulfil certain roles, we all need to be able to relate to and interact well with each other. The weaknesses we experience are so often in the transition points *within* a system, as well as *between* systems. These failings may be caused by a particular lack of expertise. More often than not, though, they are caused by breaks in the flow of information, and by the poor quality of the relationships between people in those different parts or different systems. And what causes many relationships to flounder? Competitiveness and rivalries between different parts of the system, a lack of trust borne of misunderstanding and misperception, and unhelpful assumptions held about people in different roles and groups, perhaps?

We will only effect positive change across our social systems through meaningful, robust and genuine relationships, underpinned by common purpose and trust. It will also depend on how effectively we are able to listen and talk to each other about our differences, as well as what unites and brings us together.

We therefore need to view leadership development as being about more than just the development of individual leaders. The demands of the health and care system mean that we need leaders who are able to be *inter-dependent*, to work and learn collaboratively.

So, what does relational leadership development mean for me?

It starts with self, but it is not just about me. It is about how I understand myself: what drives and energises me, what matters to me, what frustrates and what hooks me. It is about how I manage myself and my interactions with others. The work of leadership is all about how well I can relate to other people, after all.

It is about finding my own way of bringing my whole self genuinely into the leadership role. This takes openness, trust, courage, and a preparedness to be vulnerable. No one can make each of us do it. No one else can 'do' this for us; we each need to find our own way to do it, to find our own voice.

It is about accepting that I hold a lot of assumptions. Some of my assumptions, judgements, and beliefs have stood me in good stead; some may actually still be really useful. But some are now getting in the way. While it may be hard, I need to be prepared to put them to one side to hear and be open to different and possibly 'colliding' perspectives.

I may have been educated and developed in a particular professional 'club'. In a leadership role, I need to work with people who developed in different 'clubs', or outside of them altogether. Their experiences, their educational, developmental and career paths, may differ markedly from mine. These different experiences have contributed to shaping how we each think, what information matters most to each of us, how we form opinions, and how we put our ideas forward.

Collectively, there is rich potential in our diverse backgrounds and perspectives. The challenge is how we can bring our diversity together constructively and creatively – and stay open to a generative dialogue, a free flow of shared meaning. We each have a contribution to make to creating the 'psychological safety' within a group which enables and supports us to have an open, frank, and respectful quality of dialogue with each other.

It's about the space to develop a relational way of working

In a relational approach to leadership development, each of us needs to be prepared to step into an open space – for exploration, difference, conversation, connection, and experimentation. Why? Because as leaders in an increasingly complex and inter-connected system, we need to be curious about understanding difference, and open to challenge and divergence.

In the current reality of being a leader in health and care, there are tensions and paradoxes between 'old power' hierarchy and governance, and 'new power' social networks and community engagement. In this relational leadership development space, we encourage people to stick with the discomfort and edginess of exploring a different way of being as a leader: one which is more collaborative, collective, kind, and compassionate. This is hard

work in practice – and that is why it is so important to be supported within a learning community, giving and receiving developmental feedback, and seeking out constructive challenge.

We develop our capacity to work relationally and collaboratively by letting our mind, heart, and will be open to different ideas, perspectives, and experiences.^x Rather than having external speakers imparting their professional expertise and wisdom, or presenting models and toolkits, our learning events are intended as spaces for two-way dialogue, connection, difference, and divergence. We invite each other to explore and to share different ideas, approaches, and evidence – and then to integrate and synthesise these into how we each approach our leadership.

We develop our leadership capability *in practice* and through taking the time and space on our own, and with others, to reflect on our practice. This is why we have put live, collaborative leadership work at the heart of leadership³, shaped around real issues of current relevance across the system. It is our opportunity to contribute in real time to the thinking and emerging practice around a relational and collaborative approach, and to exercise our collective leadership, across Scotland. How might we better understand each other, across different communities and parts of the system? What is it really like to work collaboratively, and how do we make the most effective use of our differences and diverse strengths? What is it like to work outside our own area of ‘technical’ expertise or professional experience? How do we impact each other? How effectively do we listen to others, and give each other space to speak up? How do we surface and handle conflict, openly and effectively?

Concluding thoughts as the facilitator in relational leadership development

Leadership is about breadth of understanding, not depth of expertise. It is about convening and contributing to the conversation, rather than directing it. Similarly, as facilitator, my aim is to be *alongside* the group, rather than casting myself or being cast into the role of expert imparting or prescribing a certain body of expertise or wisdom. I may have perspectives which help others to develop or shift their understanding; and we will do that work together, alongside each other.

I have responsibility for managing the process of the programme, for keeping it relevant and useful. I share the responsibility with everyone in the group for creating a psychologically safe space in which our live experimentation and group learning can take place. We each own our contribution, what we are able and prepared to share, and how we are feeling. Our ‘contract’ for working and learning together is a dynamic set of shared aspirations and principles for how we all want to be with, and learn with and from, each other. We seek feedback from each other, and hold a shared commitment to creating and nurturing our sense of community.

Lastly, in the spirit of ‘working out loud’, I am grateful for the feedback from both current cohorts of leadership³ in helping me to express my perspective on why a relational leadership development approach feels so necessary and relevant.

Endnotes:

ⁱ <https://projectlift.scot/>

ⁱⁱ I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to Joanne Kerr as my co-designer and co-facilitator for the first two cohorts of leadership³ for her courage, generosity of spirit, and patience.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://nationalperformance.gov.scot/>

^{iv} <https://projectlift.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Project-Lift-Progress-Report-June-2019-web.pdf>

^v David Robinson (2020) The Moment We Noticed: the Relationships Observatory and our learning from 100 days of lockdown, relationshipsproject.org http://relationshipsproject.org/content/uploads/2020/07/The-Moment-We-Noticed_RelationshipsProject_202.pdf

^{vi} Margaret Hannah (2014) Humanising Healthcare. International Futures Forum. (p.12)

^{vii} Hilary Cottam (2018) Radical Help. Virago

^{viii} Edgar Schein (2013) Humble Inquiry. Berrett-Koehler Publishers. p.66, p.2

^{ix} Margaret Wheatley with Debbie Frieze (2010) Leadership in the Age of Complexity: From Hero to Host, published in Resurgence Magazine, Winter 2011. <https://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/Leadership-in-Age-of-Complexity.pdf>

^x Otto Scharmer (2019) Vertical literacy: reimagining the 21st century university. medium.com <https://medium.com/presencing-institute-blog/vertical-literacy-12-principles-for-reinventing-the-21st-century-university-39c2948192ee>