Developing Leaders – Innovative Approaches for Local Government

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Abstract
This paper examines ongoing research (Blass & Carr, 2006) exploring the development of future leaders using new and innovative approaches. Research asking experienced leaders about what they wish they had known 10 years ago is used to provide an insight into the critical incidents that shaped these leaders’ careers. These critical incidents were used as the basis for an innovative leadership development programme for the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) which is further examined in this paper.

Key words
leadership; public services; developing leaders; innovation; local government

Introduction
There are probably more books written and sold on management and leadership than any other subject. From the serious academic textbooks for MBA students, to the popular biographies outlining how the likes of Bill Gates and Richard Branson made their millions, the breadth and depth of what is on offer is great. However, while there is a move in some leadership development circles to the development of the leader as a person, most leadership development still seems to be concentrating on that part of leadership that is visible, externally verifiable, and explicit in nature. The tacit, implicit core of who a manager is tends to have been largely overlooked, perhaps because ‘improvement’ is not easily measurable. It appears to be this core, however, that is crucial to the development of leadership, and now the emphasis is shifting to the more humane side of management and leadership, with the focus turning to the individual rather than the processes that they manage.

This paper examines the case for management and leadership development moving away from the processes of management and leadership towards the development of the manager and leader as an individual. Research conducted at Ashridge is presented which began by asking experienced managers about the critical incidents in their careers and what they know now that they wish they’d known 10 years ago. From this, a picture of the development of the manager/leader themselves is painted, and a model for
management development and leadership development is presented. Finally, discussion turns to the impact of this model on management and leadership development in practice, examining how this has been applied to an innovative leadership development programme for the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA).

**Literature review**

The importance of self-insight has been relatively well documented in the last 10 years. Goleman’s (1998) work on emotional intelligence (EQ) was a bestseller and gave a different perspective to the Total Quality Management (TQM) approach popular at the time. While many HR and management development professionals might see nothing new in Goleman’s work, it did return attention to the individual and raise general management awareness to the importance of what has always been considered the ‘softer’ side of management. However, he was not the only one to be turning his attention to the individual at this time. Drucker (1999) predicted that success in the knowledge economy would come to those who know themselves – their strengths, their values and how they best perform. Since Goleman introduced the concept of EQ, others have raised the importance of multiple types of intelligence such as business intelligence, spiritual intelligence and political intelligence, to effective leadership (Cook, Macaulay & Coldicott, 2004). While this is a more rounded approach to leadership development as it looks externally as well as at the individual, Cook and colleagues (2004) still fundamentally believe that self-knowledge is the toolkit against the unexpected.

Leadership is not however simply about being in touch with your emotional self. Ashkanasy and Daus (2002) believe that there is more to emotions at work than emotional intelligence. Based on affective events theory, they claim that emotional states lie at the core of attitude formation and employee behaviour in organisations, citing the 1983 Arlie Hochschild book ‘The Managed Heart’ as establishing the idea of emotional labour or the act of managing emotion at work. People ‘catch’ or are ‘infected’ by the emotions of others.

‘Managers need to be skilled at perceiving the emotional climate of their organisations, both at the individual and collective level’ (Hochschild, 1983: 80).

In particular, negative downward spirals of emotion lead to poorer performance. The perception then needs to be acted on to prevent the downward slide. They claim that EQ is a catalyst of leadership, and developing EQ involves modelling, training, practising and rewarding desired behaviours. Hence it is behaviour-centred.

Clearly emotions and emotional intelligence seem to be important, but Covey (1997) argues that even more fundamental are the roots of any system, that is its values. He applies Greek philosophy to leadership: Ethos is the personal credibility, the trust you inspire, your integrity and ethical foundation; Pathos is the quality of the relationships you form, mentoring, understanding and caring, it is your ability to feel empathy; and Logos is the logic and reasoning that lead to influence. He claims that organisations will die if there is no nourishment of the roots (the value system), no empowerment and no synergy. This is supported by Mackenzie and Welch (2005: 13) who claim that ‘if being a manager is about what you do, becoming a leader is about learning and trusting in who you are – the personal qualities and skills that inspire people to work with you.’ They believe the essential criteria are honesty, commitment and trust.
The impact of a leaders' self-awareness was tested by Moshavi and colleagues (2003) who explored the relationship between a leader's self-awareness of their leadership behaviour and the attitudes and performance of their subordinates. Leaders were rated as under-estimators, in-agreement or over-estimators of their leadership behaviour. Not surprisingly they found that subordinates of under-estimators and those in-agreement had significantly higher productivity and supervisory and job satisfaction than did subordinates of over-estimators. Hartoonian’s (2001) work on the dynamics of character supports this. He focuses on character as a dynamic element in the life of all humans that can be changed. Identity, direction and purpose (belief) are all parts of character, and if you don’t know who you are (self-awareness), you cannot be accountable. He sees character as being about knowing who you are in relation to others and hence defines ethics as ‘our ability to perceive and sympathize with the motives and actions of others across time and place, as well as the skill to see into our own motives, actions and related consequences’ (ibid: 78).

McCollum (1999) argues that larger gains in leadership development are achieved by focusing more attention on developing the leader from within, ie. the development of the deepest level of the subjectivity of the leader, sometimes called the ego or the self. He reports on the use of Maharashi’s transcendental meditation on leadership behaviours over an eight month period in which the meditators grew significantly more in their leadership behaviours than did the control group, and hence he concludes that growth of leadership occurs with personal growth. Engaging in meditation might not be everyone’s idea of leadership development, but other studies have reached similar conclusions following less ‘alternative’ routes.

The question arises as to whether it is leadership or leader development that matter, that is, is it the role or the person that is key? Popper (2005) summarises the distinction between leadership development and leader development as the former being the development of social capital, ie. reciprocal obligations and commitments built on mutual trust and respect, while the latter is the development of human capital, ie. individual capabilities related to self-awareness and self-motivation. These serve as the foundation of intrapersonal competence. He argues that leadership is emotional influence on people, and suggests that the principles that should be at the basis of leadership development are experiential learning, vicarious learning (observing others) and transformational learning in a critical period.

Senter (2002) examines evidence around the nature versus nurture debate citing Professor Joan Freeman’s work looking at first born and only children. As they spend much of their time exclusively in adult company they learn to build a concept of themselves which is one of the signs of a confident leader. His work discusses Dr Cyril Levicki finding that leaders often owe their leadership drive to dominant mothers from whom they gain self-belief. Murray Steele at Cranfield finds that those who arrive at business schools often bloom once their self-confidence and esteem have been restored, and Professor Rob Goffee at London Business Schools sums it up as ‘be yourself, but with skill’. Perhaps then the important element is developing self-confidence.

Confidence can show itself in many guises. Clamptt and De Koch (2001) identify the need for embracing uncertainty as the essence of leadership. They say that uncertainty is suppressed because people expect leaders to always be right and predict the future with precision in their desire
to control events. Seltzer and Bentley (1999) see creativity and risk management as the skills for the new economy, defining risk as a combination of futures thinking, decision-making, stress management and learning from failure. Creativity, they argue, is dependent on the environment that is created, as it needs to be one in which trust is established, there is freedom of action, variation of context, the right balance between skills and challenge, interactive exchange of knowledge and ideas, and real world outcomes. Confidence comes into the risk element.

The importance of self-awareness, developing self-confidence, and the essence of character have become increasingly popular themes in the management and leadership literature. As we seamlessly move into what is being termed the ‘knowledge economy’ who we are and how we behave are likely to have more impact than they did in the production economy, as we as individuals will have more personal impact on our work. Yet the studies thus far are all focusing on current managers and leaders, and current management and leadership development activities, so they could be fulfilling their own prophecies. To ascertain whether or not such self-awareness really is the key to management development and leadership development, the Ashridge study focused on managers/leaders who had already been ‘developed’ so to speak, and had considerable experience. By asking them to reflect on their past and what knowledge they wish they had had with the benefit of hindsight, this study identifies the gaps that are being seen.

Methodology

A phenomenological approach was adopted in this research as the focus was to understand the key defining moments in a leader’s/manager’s development and how these served to change them or develop them in their role. To some extent, the research strategy was emergent as the original intention was to conduct interviews only, however the narrowing of focus after the first round of interviews led us to explore some issues further in focus groups. This allowed the sample to engage with each other in sharing their experiences, almost reliving critical incidents, rather than simply relating a story to a single listener.

Initially structured interviews were carried out with people selected from a wide variety of industries. These explored the concept and definition of leadership, and what had contributed to their leadership development over a number of years. The discussion then focused on how they felt leadership development should progress in order for new talent in their organisations to fulfil their potential more quickly.

All the interviewees believed that leadership was both visible and describable but then went through great difficulty in actually describing it themselves, although they all firmly believed that management and leadership differed, with the latter evolving. The discussion of definitions seemed fruitless and hence the focus shifted to the ‘evolving’ nature of leadership.

The results from the interviews showed that critical incidents and key moments of self-insight/learning seemed to be the defining features in their own development and hence focus groups were then convened to research these two key areas further.

Focus groups were held with human resource managers and line managers or functional directors. The focus groups discussed the critical incidents that they considered to have shaped their development in management and leadership roles.
Developing Leaders – Innovative Approaches for Local Government

and positions, and what they knew now that they wished they had known when they started out in their management/leadership careers.

Results

Critical incidents

The incidents that the sample recalled as being critical to their development sorted into eight groupings. Five of the groups related specifically to elements of their job role and the work itself:

1. Managing others
2. Being a manager
3. Playing the management role
4. Being managed
5. Disciplinary issues.

The other three are more to do with the individual and how they live their life:

6. Self-insight
7. Where work and life meet
8. Developing corporate awareness.

The ‘managing others’ incidents included issues that underpin everyday dealings such as taking responsibility for the team you belong to, matching your management style to individual reports and managing your people’s expectations, as well as the more sensitive issues of when and how to give praise, counselling and dealing with the first employee with stress-related issues. Arguably ‘disciplinary issues’ could be a subset of this grouping, but was separated at this point to highlight how critical the handling of disciplinary issues seems to be in the development of a manager’s career.

‘Being a manager’ covers the gambit of experiences when individuals come to the realisation that they are actually in charge, and includes the difficult situation of being promoted to manage the team you work and drink with, to managing your secretary/PA, and suddenly finding yourself in charge as the whole level above you goes.

The actual day-to-day tasks of management form the group ‘playing the management role’ and include recruiting, setting pay rises, making decisions, budgets and redundancies. The group titled ‘being managed’ refers to incidents where someone superior to the sample had a impact on them, such as getting a pat on the back from the CEO, being mentored well, and having respect for someone, to learning what not to do from a not very good boss, falling out with your boss and having to rebuild credibility, and being held back by a boss who didn’t want to lose you.

The group of incidents titled ‘developing corporate awareness’ have a more personal than work orientation to their expression. For example the first board meeting, either challenging or following the company line, and delivering an unpopular line which you disagree with all feature here. It is the impact that these experiences have on the individual that makes them critical, not the impact that they have on the organisation.

‘Where work and life meet’ is where the individual has had some critical insight into the balance of their values and desires between their work and personal lives. Some of these were quite dramatic such as a partner dying and the company not being supportive, to the more common occurrences of office romances or romances with a competitor.

The final grouping of ‘self-insight’ refers to incidents where the criticality is expressed in terms of what it made the individual learn about themselves. For example, humility, learning to say no, taking risks, and accepting when you screw up.
Hindsight learning

When the sample were asked what it is that they know now that they wish they had known 10 years ago, their answers split into seven groups.

1. Power and politics
2. Stepping outside the box
3. Relating to others
4. Building a career
5. Sense of self
6. Personal learning
7. Focus of energy

Power and politics

The ‘power and politics’ group covers positive learning such as:

- the importance of building and maintaining a broad external network outside a big company
- achieving win/win is almost always possible and best
- the importance of trust and being trustworthy
- more negative learning such as the grapevine can be destructive as well as useful
- don’t make unnecessary enemies
- yesterday’s enemy could be tomorrow’s boss.

Much of the learning here could be seen to derive from the critical incidents that were grouped under the heading ‘developing corporate awareness’.

Stepping outside the box

The ‘stepping outside the box’ hindsight stems largely from the ‘playing the management role’ incidents and covers learning such as:

- rules and procedures are for guidance not blind obedience
- don’t rule out something because it seems too simple
- projections are real while boundaries may be an illusion.

Relating to others

‘Relating to others’ unsurprisingly appears to be the learning that stems from the critical incidents to do with ‘managing others’. This group includes learning about:

- how others see me
- how people think differently
- not being afraid to recruit someone who is better than you
- the importance of motivating people.

With regard to the disciplinary subset of the managing others group, learning here is reflected in statements such as:

- you can never sack someone too early
- first impressions are not always right
- the differences between being liked and being respected.

Building a career

‘Building a career’ is the smallest group and reflects learning around:

- spotting opportunities and taking them
- preparing yourself for something new and difficult
- being prepared for the unexpected in terms of your career path.

There was also learning here regarding the expectations of organisations and the lack of support they might offer if you don’t ask for more. This learning is most likely to have come from the incidents that were classified as ‘being a manager’.

Sense of self

Learning relating to the individual’s ‘sense of self’ links to those critical incidents that were grouped as giving ‘self-insight’. Included in this group are statements such as:
• be true to yourself even if it’s unpopular
• recognise weakness as this can be a strength
• confidence comes from within
• being a leader is much more powerful than doing leadership.

Personal learning
‘Personal learning’ while also relating to the individual’s sense of self, is more directive in its nature and therefore links more closely with the incidents relating to ‘being managed’. Included here were issues such as:

• you know more than you think
• no one is irreplaceable

• bosses don’t have all the answers
• don’t prevaricate and when to be led.

Focus of energy
Finally ‘focus of energy’ reflects the learning that is derived from the incidents that occur ‘where work and life meet’, and relate to individual priorities, use of time and stress. For example, statements here include knowing when to stop, how not to get overwhelmed by work pressure, and that something happens to you in your mid-30s that changes your priorities.

The critical incidents and their associated learning hindsight are represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Critical incidents leading to hindsight learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical incidents</th>
<th>Hindsight learning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being a manager</td>
<td>Building a career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing others</td>
<td>Relating to others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being managed</td>
<td>Personal learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Playing the management role</td>
<td>Stepping outside the box</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing corporate awareness</td>
<td>Power and politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where work and life meet</td>
<td>Focus of energy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self insight</td>
<td>Sense of self</td>
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At the outset of this research, there was no expectation or indeed intention for the results from both sets of questions to link or relate in any way. Although, this perhaps reflects a naivety on the part of the researchers as having viewed the results it seems obvious that the learning that people would have liked to have 10 years earlier is likely to stem from what they perceived as critical incidents during their working lives, as it is the fact that they learnt so much that probably made them consider the incident as critical.

Developing a programme for IDeA – The Academy for Executive Leadership

In 2007, the researchers had an opportunity to weave together the strands of their research and put them to practical use working with the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), to design a programme for chief executives, directors and heads of services in local government.

This programme, called the Academy for Executive Leadership (AEL) aims to help key leaders address the demanding longer-term strategic, political and democratic issues that will shape the future of local government. It comprises three modules, the first two of which are held at Ashridge Business School, which examine leadership at the personal, organisational, political and community levels. Action learning and peer group reflection, sharing and support form part of the programme as does a dedicated programme website which includes a link to Ashridge’s Virtual Learning Resource Centre (VLRC) which provides extensive online reference material to participants.

Richard Masters, Director of Leadership at the IDeA explains that: ‘the AEL is the Improvement and Development Agency for local government’s flagship leadership development programme for managers who have already achieved top jobs, and who wish to go far beyond the familiar day-to-day leadership issues to explore the longer-term strategic, political and democratic matters that will shape the future of local government’. He notes that the challenges these participants face appear to be getting more acute; ‘a key challenge facing local authority leaders over the next five years is the increasing need to influence external decision makers, rather than necessarily having direct line management control. The shift to building external partnerships continues and this reflects the shift to more external focus in an increasingly complex and inter-dependant world.’

The researchers applied their knowledge of critical leadership incidents, and in particular those related to the issues Richard describes, when developing the programme by including experiential learning opportunities and theoretical inputs which aim to prepare participants for the important situations which they are likely to encounter during their leadership career. One important inclusion on the programme is a day-long simulation on module two during which participants run a public sector organisation set in the year 2015 and over the course of the day face some challenges which recreate the critical experiences. The aim is not only to integrate the learning that participants have during the wider AEL programme, but also very consciously to build ‘muscle memory’ so that when participants face the critical incidents in the future, they feel they have already dealt with them before and can as a result deal with the situation next time more effectively. It is fundamental therefore to create a safe, but very convincing environment and this is achieved through enlisting the skills of a number of the Ashridge faculty with deep knowledge of the public sector, experienced actors, and the Ashridge media team.
Megan Rietz is continuing her research into the robustness of the hypothesis of building muscle memory around critical incidents by interviewing past participants and feedback from both the AEL and Ashridge’s open programme, the Future Leaders Experience, indicates that this simulation is indeed working successfully.

Cate Hall, Corporate Director at Watford Borough Council, attended the AEL in the summer of 2007. She explained that the simulation ‘felt real and was played out in real time, so I had the chance to do things that I don’t normally have the opportunity to experience in an environment that was not unsafe’. This, she reflected, ‘took away some of the worry about facing these situations in the future’.

Building confidence in leaders appears to be of enormous importance. The researchers know from feedback that it is when participants feel that they have actually experienced something and come through it that confidence builds; examining models and case studies in a removed manner is simply insufficient.

The length of the simulation is also important in that it is long enough for participants to, as Cate Hall describes it, ‘behave as you really are’. This means that feedback, which is extensive from both other participants and the tutors, is correspondingly more real. The researchers recognise also that the day is usually an emotionally charged experience, which appears to add weight to its long-lasting effect.

Richard Masters in summary explains that ‘the simulation provides a unique opportunity to consolidate, extend and deepen the learning and experience of the participants of the programme. In particular, where individuals wish, they can go well beyond the familiar and gain new insights into leadership, this being consolidated by high quality feedback and review’.

We continue, on the AEL programme, and on our Ashridge Open Programme, The Future Leaders Experience, to work with participants to prepare them for the challenges they face within the sector and the ongoing research into the areas of critical incidents and muscle memory will continue to feed into the programme design.

Conclusion

In his questioning ‘What if the academy actually mattered?’, Donald Hambrick (1994) identified three kinds of people: those who make things happen; those who watch things happen; and those who wonder what happened. He saw the role of the scholar as the middle one and argued that it needed to move to being the first one. The researchers believe that preparing the public sector leaders of the future depends on abandoning traditional methods of executive education, and welcoming in opportunities that enable leaders to truly experience, and learn from, situations that are vital to their, and therefore their authorities’, development and success.

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