

It's Complicated: Apprentice Leaders on the Edge of Chaos

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Abstract

A view from the dance floor of ALICSE participants showed that the integrated children's services remain under pressure to become multi-dimensional with the rhetorical push to a joint working becoming increasingly complex and difficult to navigate. This was the view of a 360 degree questionnaire to a number of ALICSE participants and reflections from an in-depth dialogue. The main findings suggested collective professionalism requires collaborative relationships between organisations and individuals, and this collaboration poses the most significant challenge for educational leadership and management. The participants on the dance floor often reciting phrases like: Letting go of control, no hierarchy, self-organising. The main conclusion being an individual needs to be self-organised and it takes a leader to be confident to manage ambiguity and complexity. Using complex adaptive systems theory and blended leadership styles theories, we will assert that distributional leadership is required to navigate the complex environment. Futures thinking suggests that we could use complex adaptive systems theory to help build an effective communication strategy for individuals, teams and services allowing them to self-organise.

Key words: leadership, partnership, children's services; complexity; adaptive system.

Introduction

Children's services in England require a new way of working with a continuously reconfigured workforce and fluctuating financial budgets. The Advanced Leadership in an Integrated Children's Services Environment (ALICSE) is one unique programme that has been developed and delivered in the East Midlands, England, by the nine Local Authority Directors of Children's Services (DCSs) and the School Development Support Agency (SDSA) in direct response to succession management. The main purpose for ALICSE was in succession planning to give established and emerging leaders an opportunity to think and act differently. ALICSE is not seen as a panacea for leadership development, rather, a lens to

look at developing future leadership with skills for better managing complexity and problem solving in an incremental change than relying on failed big bangs – the high jump theory of change.

The rationale behind ALICSE

The ALICSE programme was framed in the response to the UK Labour Government's 'Every Child Matters' (ECM) policy drive between 2002 and 2010. The positioning and future of the ECM policy was radically reframed following the change of government in 2010 but the legacy may still have an impact on key aspects of leadership and management. The 2020 Children and Young People's Workforce Strategy sets out the government's vision and values that everyone who works with children and young people should be... 'committed to partnership and integrated working' (DCSF, 2008: 6-7). The Integrated Children's Services in Higher Education Conference Report (2008) acknowledged better alignment of inter-professional learning opportunities and developing integrated qualifications between HEIs and integrated workforce.

Main aims of ALICSE

Succession planning figures (Virtual Staff College (VSC), 2012, Online) in England indicate that we will have a significant national shortfall of suitably qualified and experienced aspirant DCSs to fill vacancies moving forward. Since the launch of the Leadership Development Programme for Directors of Children's Services in 2009, over 120 DCSs have taken part in it (Sandford et al., 2012: 2). The role of the DCS has changed from that of being a subject specialist to that of being a partnership and relationship manager, with ultimately professional development issues this poses. Furthermore, the current government agenda for modernising and transforming personal, social educational and health services emphasises the need for integrated services. This frames our thinking for DCSs preparation in how to move from 'siloed provision' (McKimm and Phillips, 2010: ix) of such agencies to an alignment of greater integration and collaboration across boundaries. This implies the need for leadership development that sharpens the competencies and skills to work across traditional boundaries, build new coalitions and challenge the causes of inertia. This is what ALICSE aims to do.

Distinguishing characteristics of the ALICSE programme

ALICSE is distinctive in several ways. It is led by the Directors of Children's Services (DCSs) and key partners to develop whole system leadership. The ALICSE website publicity and handbook (SDSA, 2012, Online) refers to 'cohorts developed as communities of learning practice' and 'ALICSE is a totally personalised programme'. These concepts offer possible starting points for the research study developed later in the paper. The programme brings research methods and understanding to practice in a concrete way through partnership with five local HEIs, which is stronger than other regions. The flexibility of the programme enables the achievement of individual learning goals through a range of opportunities and the expectation that the learning will be put into practice in a specific project that will directly contribute to development in the local area. Its regional dimension and networking are considered very important but far from unique and cohorts come from cross organisations, probably more so than any other English region. ALICSE is distinctive as it brings multi-agency partners and academics together to co-construct solutions to wicked issues; to provide imaginative ways of accrediting learning that makes operational sense and to extend the DCSs talent pool to include multi-agency partners.

Some background

In developing deeper leadership approaches for inter-agency collaboration, we need new thinking and acting by seeing the view from the balcony (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002), compared to assumed transferability of leadership theories set for single organisations. The Virtual Staff College (VSC) (2012, Online) identifies four gaps in leadership development that need filling: political awareness; risk-taking; social care and protection issues; working with elected members and commissioning. High on the agenda is emotional intelligence for building trusting partnerships (Hartley and Hinksman, 2003) and 'connectedness' (the ability to build effective relationships) with new kinds of external partners – regulators, competitors, NGOs or local communities (Business in the Community, Spring 2009: 10). Greater understanding of managing multiple agendas, 'wicked issues' (Grint, 2005) and 'ambiguity in membership' (Morrison and Arthur, 2013: 184).

The leadership challenge here is to ensure sensitive and common use of language when speaking across boundaries (VSC, 2012). Glatter (2008) reviewed some key literature on LD and found insufficient research evidence of collaborative effectiveness and summed up the emerging picture as, 'high on exhortation and low on evaluation' (p.39). There are opponents of the concept of collaboration, saying that professional interests are sacrificed in putting

collaboration first (Whittington, 2003; Axelsson and Axelsson, 2009), suggesting leadership development which focuses learning on new ways of working and thinking about leadership.

Managing complexity in an Integrated Services agenda

The systems and relationships which have grown from the implementation of wider integration policies in Children's Services are complex, complicated and difficult to navigate. It is from within this complicated system the delivery of Local Authority services for vulnerable young people are required to operate. Public services are now delivered through intricate collaborations and partnerships working together to achieve positive outcomes for young people and their families. This is a challenge for Local Authorities in terms of leadership and management. Roles and responsibilities of front line workers are changing; there is a requirement to remodel old ways of operating. As new technology provides us with solutions to joint data collection and recording, the need to reduce the duplication of work has become vitally important.

Gronn (2003) likens the integration of teams and services to how computers are networked. By linking relevant users together, sharing information and creating centralised points of access, relationships are more efficient because they are inter-dependant and do not act autonomously. The new Local Authority landscape is one where the 'modern manager is placed in a network of mutually dependant relationships' (ibid p. 30). Cranston (2013) calls for different leaders requiring the need for greater professional critical self-reflection and Bottery (2004) sees great value in this dialectal approach to create shared meanings about what is needed from the integrated children's services for the public.

It is this inter-dependency, this interconnectedness that is creating the contemporary challenge in local government. This is not tried and tested ground, 'we have not been here before' (Linsky and Lawrence 2011). In fact it provides the Local Authority with a quandary. What skills and qualities does a modern leader of integrated services require? Educational leadership management theories tend to centre on the thoughts of leaders, or as Gunter (2013) explains as recipe books on how to be an effective leader. What about the operational members of staff, where are their voices in this plethora of leadership theory, as it's not all about what the Council leader says?

If the view of the lone heroic leader has almost faded away as Gronn (2003) argues, the pull of this ideological view, as in Morrison and Arthur's (2013) research is still attractive. This is why we still want to know what the Council leader says. Transformational and distributed leadership theories have helped to shed light on the collaborative relationships of inter-agency working but they describe how to execute leadership tasks and rely too heavily on the ability of the leader to be intensely self-aware and reflective. Morrison and Arthur (2013) assert that much educational leadership theory still rests on the assumption of the lone leader, operating in a hierarchical structure. However, multi-dimensional agency collaboration is a complex cluster of interconnected knots, not necessarily in a hierarchical pattern. What the Council leader thinks is only one interpretation seen through a Children's services based lens and it is just too narrow for modern integrated service delivery.

Can Complex Adaptive System theory shed light at looking at contemporary approaches in managing integrated services?

The complex view of leadership described in systems leadership, and embodied in complex adaptive systems theory provides a panoramic lens. The term Complex Adaptive System (CAS) has grown up around a body of work concerned with describing how living, adaptable and changeable systems exist and maintain themselves. Theories surrounding complex adaptive systems popularised by Plsek and Greenhaigh (2001) do not encompass one single theory, but are a collection of questions and research that has tried to explain how certain human systems work. Some examples of CAS include the biosphere and the ecosystem, how cells develop to produce embryos, the stock market and in fact any human endeavour when based within a group as part of a wider social system. It is based on the idea that simple rules can produce an infinite amount of variety through feedback loops. This scientific theory has in recent years been used in theories of system leadership and whole system leadership (Scott et al., 2013). The individual parts in a system should be viewed from the context of the relationship they have with the other individual parts in the system. Interaction does not take place in a vacuum. Fullan (2001) discusses the importance of relationships within the context of change. In a dynamic world 'everything exists only in relationship to everything else's, these dynamic fluid interactions lead to complex unpredictable outcomes' (p. 52), he goes on to assert that 'leaders create relationships', (although we rather think that individuals are more than capable of making their own connections without the need for any leadership intervention).

Complex adaptive systems theory does pose a huge challenge to the public sector (Benington and Hartley, 2009), as well as using this to describe the system and how it operates it has failed to illustrate why one certain thing remains stubbornly present. Hierarchy. Last time we looked the Local Authority remains in a deep attachment to hierarchy. Yet CAS maintains that there can be order without control, cells do self-organise, they appear to be 'networked' to a main computer which helps to sort them into component parts (such as in foetal development in the womb). So how does this transpose into the public sector? If systems have a life of their own, and they are able to adapt to the context, they are also able to influence the context to such an extent that they are able to change the environment in which they operate. A reason why national policy is so often dogged by unintended consequences according to Morrison and Arthur (2013).

Systems driven by relationships, no direct hierarchy and self-organisation sounds like the materials nightmares are made of. For example how would this work in child protection services, where there are just too many risks? However, the theory does firmly place the leader within a system rather than operating and managing it from the outside. CAS can explain how individuals in teams, teams within divisions, divisions in services and services within the public sector operate. It helps to explain cultural and historical differences, incremental disjointedness and sub-optimal performance. It depicts the macro, mezzo and micro aspects of political levels inherent in collaboration (Coleman, 2011). It describes the very interconnectedness of the systems in which we operate from a scientific lens. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) urged leaders to 'get on the balcony' and view the dance floor. CAS can provide the stairs. Viewing relationships from within a context can give leaders new perspectives.

Methodology

Voices from the dance floor, from operational members of staff within a newly formed integrated children's service located in a Local Authority were collated and analysed over an 18 month period. Using a qualitative case study approach five separate staff surveys were conducted during a period of integration and change which witnessed the staff population increase from 190 members to 260 with a wide remit of statutory and non-statutory services for vulnerable children and young people. For the purposes of this study the findings will concentrate on just three of the surveys. The reasons for this is because survey A was unable to apply a robust appropriate methodology and survey C was conducted as an action learning

set to explore different objectives and aspects of the service. The purpose of the studies in survey B, D and E was to measure the effects of change and integration on the 'shop floor' and to inform future internal communications policy. The challenge of this approach was to ensure that the analysis of data was not subjective, the appropriateness of the samples, and any findings were not open to the researchers' personal interpretation. Therefore a validation group, practitioner lead, with a mandate to develop internal communications was created. The group served to give the researchers integrity by questioning findings, reducing the subjectivity and credibility of any claims to knowledge, and to act as a 'critical friend' (McNiff et al., 2003).

Survey B consisted of face to face and group interviews, participants were recruited directly to provide a representative sample of the staff population, for example, members from a variety of teams from across the whole geographical area (Cohen et al., 2000). This survey used semi-structured questionnaires utilizing probing interview techniques to question staff about their thoughts and feelings on the way in which the service had communicated service level integration. Survey D consisted of an online survey using semi-structured questionnaires designed to probe staff further on their preferred methods of communication, unresolved issues following the integration programme and future suggestions for an internal communication policy. This approach was intended to be contextual and interactive so as to interpret, describe and understand peoples' ideas and experiences of large organisational change (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). Simple random sampling techniques was used (Cohen et al., 2000) because the whole population were given an equal chance to take part anonymously. Survey E consisted of three separate focus groups designed to investigate the themes which had emerged from surveys B and D. It was important to triangulate the findings from B and D and the participants were identified through their representation of different parts of the service and included staff that had been previously under represented. Although the surveys were predominantly qualitative they did also produce some quantitative data as well (McNiff et al., 2003). Qualitative data from survey D was broken down into statements and cross referenced against the themes and categories identified and emerging from survey B and 'counted' to reveal the most reoccurring themes. The top 5 (explored in more depth in survey E) were: leadership, lack of communication, decision making, job roles and clarity. The sample sizes varied. In survey B and D, operational staff participated on an anonymous basis, the whole staff population during this time frame had shifted from 190 to 260, so it is difficult to provide exact percentages in relation to participation rates, however,

both surveys produced responses from 76 staff members, with a further 18 people participating in the focus groups in survey E. This equates to 36% (94 staff members) of the total staff population calculated at March 2013.

Findings and Discussion

The findings and analysis revealed that the wicked issues (Grint and Brookes, 2010) emerging from the integration agenda were: leadership communication and decision making; clarity of roles and responsibilities and trusting relationships. Looking from the balcony the dance floor is not (as yet) coordinated. Individuals did not have clarity on their tasks, and how their tasks related to their teams and therefore the wider service. The interconnectedness between individual, task and team has become blurred. Comments such as “confused about what everyone does, and who they are”, and, “having to learn the skills of other professions” and a concern about the relationship with other services were plentiful and reflected by many staff members.

“There is a miscommunication of roles, I am not sure why” (survey B)

“Lack of understanding about different roles and responsibilities within (Service 1) and (Service 2) and other related teams such as (Service 3)” (survey D)

“Staff morale is not as good as it should be compounded by apparent constant changes to roles and responsibilities” (survey D)

Frontline workers expressed a strong desire to ‘dance’ together but they were not sure, or confident, about the ‘steps’. Like the rise of the new silent disco movement (which offer their clubbers headphones and access to a vast array of different music so they can make their own choice), the dancers occupy the same space, but they do not experience a shared event. Do integrated teams require leadership to determine the music, allowing them to self-organise on the dance floor and build trust through shared experiences? Practitioners consistently commented about the lack of clarity coming from leadership and asked for vision, purpose and direction in order for them to get on with the job.

“The group seemed to agree that they were fairly confident in carrying out their work but found it hard to explain the service to external and partner agencies” (survey E)

“No clear direction for staff (...) to have and input into the development and improvement of the service (...) no opportunity for staff to influence or suggest ideas for moving the service forward.” (survey D)

“Feel like the last to join & unsure how it is supposed to work but willing to work on this” (survey B)

“[We need] clear expectations with theoretical guidance & professional research” (survey B)

Maybe we have taken this disco dance floor analogy too far, but hopefully there is message here for all. Everything is interconnected, and it is this that has to be understood by the new leaders of integration. Like the networked computer, services are being delivered within a network of mutually dependant relationships. The scientific lens could help public services to re-focus on the complexity of human interaction and intervention, and CAS could help to re-focus the lens further and see past the old views of task based, person centred or distributed leadership approaches to something more complex and more sophisticated. When the relationship of the individual to their immediate environment is confused, as in Adair's (1988) interconnectedness of the individual, team and organisation (where the task and person centred approaches interlink), then CAS can explain how this affects the rest of the system.

All the elements of the CAS model interact, it is dynamic, constantly changing and involves the sharing of information at the heart of it. The individuals (schema) interact in multi-faceted non-linear ways and can affect any other part of the system. The majority of these interactions occur with immediate neighbours and this can explain why parts of the system are able to function in ignorance of the wider system. CAS organisation is completely open and it is therefore difficult to define boundaries and maintain energy flow. This has implications for the integration agenda, confusion can quickly spread; a lack of understanding of role can affect any number of the other parts of the system and can cross boundaries into other (seemingly) un-related teams. CAS explains that all systems have a history, what happens in the past is co-responsible for present behaviours, this produces disjointed incrementalism. Therefore if information sharing is at the heart of CAS then clear communication must go some of the way to be an antidote. The survival of CAS is dependant on the way in which individuals interact and relate to each other. These relationships between the individuals are more important than the sum of the individuals

themselves. And this is the crux of the matter, internal communication between individuals, teams and services is so crucial to the survival of the system not just for times of change, but always because change in human systems is inevitable and constant.

The true contradiction of CAS in relation to leadership in public service is the relationship to hierarchy. The challenge of effective integration is practitioner lead self-organisation, inherent in this approach is risk taking and living with the ambiguity this may bring. Leadership must provide the dance floor and pick the right music to get colleagues dancing together and building trusting relationships.

Conclusions: a way ahead

The arguments in this paper are not about leadership preparation or development. Rather, they are about opening up a dialogue with various partners and collaborators and engaging them in understanding more deeply what leadership is, and ought to be about in leading an integrated children's service in the 21st century. Bottery (2004) calls for engagement in dialectic between different leaders requiring 'much greater professional critical self-reflection' (Cranston, 2013: 138). So it is more about shared understanding of values, beliefs and ideologies grounded in what is best for the public good. Such new professional responsibility poses some real challenges as noted in the paper. Reflecting on the case study here and the wide literature, a number of principles emerge for consideration. Firstly, Leadership is about a vision, a passion to make a difference, a better future, for the community, better delivered as shared, collaborative, distributed venture. This means, letting go of the past and looking at new ways to solve problems, some wicked and complex and some tame, based on leaders having a moral compass (Bottery 2004). Secondly, complex adaptive systems offers one approach to leading and managing change, there are many more, requiring fitness for purpose, such as Cranston's (2013) notion of leader of people and of ideas requiring all leaders to be learners, and this may require using multiple lenses to achieve resolution. The third principle is that leaders need to accept responsibility for their actions, but to do this through empowering others for multiple leadership roles. The final principle is that leadership is an on-going journey and risk taking and creativity offers major challenges to achieve the desired vision. The leadership in an integrated children's services requires the leaders to drive and lead the journey to a new place for the whole community, staff, community, families and children. Achieving work-life balance are significant and area of research for the future.

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