Silvester, J. & Wyatt, M. (2015). Developing strong and diverse political leaders. The Psychologist, 28(5), pp. 368-371.

CITY UNIVERSITY LONDON
EST 1894

City Research Online

Original citation: Silvester, J. & Wyatt, M. (2015). Developing strong and diverse political leaders. The Psychologist, 28(5), pp. 368-371.

Permanent City Research Online URL: http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/11831/

How do we develop strong and diverse political leaders?

Jo Silvester and Madeleine Wyatt[i]

Cass Business School, City University London

[i]Kent Business School, University of Kent

Introduction

More than a century ago Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894) commented that "Politics is perhaps the only profession for which no preparation is deemed necessary" and today it seems that his comments still hold. Despite a wealth of understanding in work psychology about how to train and support people in work roles (c.f. Aguinas & Kraiger, 2009), very few efforts have been made to apply this knowledge to political work. Indeed, work psychologists have had remarkably little to say about some of the most important questions relating to democratic leadership, including: what do we mean by good political performance, how can we support and encourage aspiring politicians, and how can we develop strong and diverse political talent? While political scientists and the media are all too ready to debate whether or not Members of Parliament (MPs) should have second jobs, or whether too many new politicians enter Parliament with little experience of the workplace beyond being a political intern or researcher for a MP, the voices of work psychologists remain conspicuous by their absence.

In this paper we argue that work psychology as a discipline has much to contribute to these debates, and to more fundamental questions about the nature and importance of political work. We focus in particular on the question of why, compared with the considerable efforts and monies devoted to developing public and private sector leaders, so little formal support

and development is available for aspiring and incumbent politicians. We suggest that while it might be easy to blame this lack of training on politicians themselves - to ascribe the apparent reluctance to admit or address development needs to arrogance, hubris or self-interest - there may be legitimate reasons for being wary about introducing training to politics. Furthermore, we argue that while developing 'good politicians' is both a fascinating and important challenge, it also prompts questions about some of the underlying assumptions of work and performance that can limit the application of work psychology in senior, more ambiguous work roles. In short, we propose that politics and psychology have much to learn from each other.

Political Views about Training and Development

When we began working with politicians and political parties just over a decade ago, we were surprised by the lack of training for political roles compared with other types of work role, as well as a general resistance to the idea of formal development for politicians. Our general sense that political development was problematic increased over the course of several projects when we were able to interview and capture the views of MPs, parliamentary candidates and local councillors. Three common sources of resistance towards training and development emerged: first, a view that politicians simply don't need training or development; secondly, that practical challenges make it too difficult or costly to provide formal training and development for politicians, and; thirdly the belief that the introduction of training and development poses a threat to democratic process.

The first view (i.e., lack of need) might look like arrogance (i.e., "I am elected by the people, so why do I need training?") But unlike other professionals political candidates are not expected to possess a specific body of knowledge or skills. We do not insist that our politicians pass certain exams in order to be elected. In fact the very nature of democratic process means that we assume elected representatives should be able to rely on the

knowledge and expertise they have already acquired outside politics to help them perform their political roles. And where they lack certain knowledge or expertise, politicians are able to rely on the support of appointed officials, such as civil servants or local government officials, to help them make sense of political procedures and technical areas. However, as Weber argues, relying on the expertise of employed officers or civil servants is also problematic, because a lack of knowledge can leave politicians "...in the position of the 'dilettante' who stands opposite the 'expert'" (1970, p.232), or at the very least less powerful than the trained officials who manage the administration. Arguably, therefore, politicians still need to know enough to be able to evaluate the information they are given, and to challenge decisions effectively if required.

The second view (i.e., that practical challenges make it difficult to provide or engage in training and development) is usually associated with comments about insufficient time for politicians to engage in training, or a lack of available resources to support training activities. Certainly political roles can require a 24/7 commitment from MPs who need to split their time between Westminster and their local constituencies (Weinberg & Cooper, 2003). Though on-going debate about whether British MPs should be allowed second jobs does appear to contradict this statement. With 180 of the current 650 British MPs declaring second jobs that generate total earnings of more than £7.4 million (Pickard and Rigby, 2015), it seems that time could well be found if the motivation was there to do so. The practical challenge is probably more difficult for local politicians who, unlike MPs, are not usually paid for their roles, and by volunteering their time often struggle to maintain a balance between the demands of paid employment, family commitments, and council duties. That said, finding time for development is probably not an insurmountable challenge.

Potentially more problematic, albeit less discussed, are public attitudes towards spending money on training and development for politicians. This is frequently attacked in

the press as an unnecessary, self-indulgent and self-serving expense on the part of elected leaders who may be in their role for relatively short periods of time, with no guarantee of re-election. Training may also be seen as a Machiavellian means for politicians to increase their power over others (Searing, 1995). Therefore, despite a growing dialogue about the need to support new politicians (see Cooper-Thomas this issue; Fox & Korris, 2012; Steinack, 2012), limited public awareness about the nature and challenges of political work remains an important barrier to the introduction of development activities.

The third reason for resisting training relates to a perceived threat to democratic process. At first this appears to reflect hubris on the part of politicians (i.e., "I'm elected so who are you to tell me I need training?") But on closer inspection such resistance reflects an underlying narrative about the need to navigate a complex, ambiguous, contested environment, where power is the currency of success and politics the work by which this currency is won or lost. Thus resistance towards training and development for politicians derives in part from the belief that these formal activities pose a significant threat to democratic process, because they undermine the legitimate right of elected representatives to determine how they will enact their roles and represent the needs and views of their constituents. At the heart of this argument is a power struggle about who has the right to determine or define the content and performance of political roles. Ferris and Judge (2001) point out that human resource management systems like training and development are political systems in their own right because they exist to perpetuate managers' control over employees. Therefore formal training in politics is problematic, because it legitimises certain types and areas of knowledge, and implies the existence of a 'higher order' with the power to determine the actions of elected representatives.

King (1981) argues that politicians are not professionals, because they are not expected to possess a distinct body of technical knowledge when they are elected - nor are

they required to develop one once in office. Not only does this mean that politicians have the legitimate power to determine for themselves what and how they should learn, it also means that political roles can be open to individuals from <u>all</u> backgrounds who possess diverse knowledge and skills acquired via education, work <u>or</u> life experience. Put simply, formal training and development is problematic in politics, because it implies the need to possess specific knowledge, skills and abilities and challenges Abraham Lincoln's basic premise of democracy that government should be 'of the people, by the people, for the people'. Of course, this also raises an important question for work psychologists: if much of our discipline is devoted to creating systems to select, assess and develop employees that are based on prescribed managerial norms and needs, and which therefore help to strengthen managerial power and authority – does this make the discipline inherently undemocratic? More specifically, do work psychologists pay insufficient attention to the pluralistic and potentially conflicting needs and views of different groups within the workplace?

Democracy and the challenge of inclusion: Learning how to be politicians

While there may be persuasive arguments as to why formal training for aspiring or incumbent politicians should be treated with caution, the real challenge lies in identifying an alternative to the current situation. At present a lack of formal development means that new politicians must rely overwhelmingly on informal strategies to learn about their roles, yet some MPs have significant advantage over others when it comes to acquiring knowledge. As shown in Cooper-Thomas's paper (this issue), new MPs are socialised by sitting MPs and civil servants. However, some new MPs will have gained insider knowledge of Parliament and possible 'routes to power' before they were elected, because they have served as interns, research assistants or supporters of sitting MPs. With informal learning largely controlled through patronage, new MPs who lack access to insiders with power to provide insight on 'how things really work' must rely on their own efforts to make sense of, and decode,

observable actions of significant others. Not only is this process likely to take significantly longer, it is also much more likely to lead to embarrassing mistakes that can reduce the likelihood of being perceived as competent and promoted to significant roles within Parliament.

Thus a key problem with these procedures is that, as we see in other organisational contexts, learning depends on gatekeepers willing to share their knowledge and understanding (Blass, Brouer, Perrewé, & Ferris, 2007; Mann, 1995). This means that those with less privileged access lose out in their efforts to learn and are overtaken by those who have already developed networks of contacts in Parliament and know who to call on for support or information. Therefore not only does this slow learning down, it poses significant risks for diversity and inclusion in the political sphere (Silvester & Wyatt, forthcoming).

There is plenty of evidence that informal ambiguity in the workplace increases the likelihood of unfair discrimination, and reduces access to the information and political knowledge necessary to gain power and influence (c.f. Eagly & Carli, 2007). We see this happen with minority groups in other work settings, for example, senior black and minority ethnic leaders in a government department described finding it more difficult to develop the knowledge and skills required for leadership positions (Wyatt & Silvester, 2015). The information required to navigate the labyrinth of complex paths to power is selectively passed via developmental relationships, informal interactions with mentors, sponsors and network contacts who are usually white males. With different social backgrounds it can be difficult for women and minority groups to gain access to these groups and thus to learn the 'rules of the game'.

Enhancing formal development activities can reduce reliance on ad hoc procedures and networks of interpersonal relationships. Work psychologists frequently introduce formal structured assessment procedures to ensure fairness, by focusing decisions on job-related

competences and skills rather than whether an individual is known by significant others. In politics, however, power and influence is both achieved and enacted through relationships. Thus patronage (i.e., being a 'favoured son or daughter': Shepherd-Robinson & Lovenduski, 2002) can significantly increase the likelihood that an individual will be chosen as a candidate for a constituency. Similarly, once they enter Parliament patronage also helps to ensure certain new MPs have access to information that makes it easier for them to navigate the perplexing parliamentary environment. Yet this also means that those who have the power to offer patronage, and control what information can be divulged to who, are likely to be more resistant to formal development systems because these undermine their ability (i.e., power) to influence. Formal development may therefore serve to level the playing field, however it may still not succeed in improving diversity and inclusion if it focuses exclusively on explicit, task-related and technical skills without paying sufficient attention to the tacit or more secretive knowledge that individuals need to navigate their environments successfully (Doldor, 2013).

There is clearly a need to address the lack of diversity in politics. Black and minority ethnic (BME) individuals comprise 4% and women 23% of MPs (and just four of the 23 cabinet ministers) in the House of Commons (Keep, 2010), a figure that places the UK 60th in the world in terms of female parliamentary representation (Inter-parliamentary union, 2015). The Equality and Human Rights Commission estimate that it will take as many as 14 elections to achieve gender parity at national level. Similar figures are found at local level where 32% of elected councillors are women. As formal development activities equalise access to task related, technical skills and implicit knowledge, they should also increase the speed at which new MPs (particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds) make the transition into Parliament. Formal development is therefore a strategy that should be pursued.

In fact, significant efforts were made to respond to the need for more formal provision of political development in local government following the election of a Labour Government in 1997. Facilitated by establishment of the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA: more recently the Local Government Association) councillor development activities were initiated such as the Next Generation for Talented Councillors programme, which aims to train and develop councillors in the workings of government and support them to progress in their political careers. A number of other initiatives were also introduced, such as toolkits and peer mentoring to support development of political skills amongst councillors. Although advances were made in promoting awareness of the need for training and development, unfortunately many of these efforts suffered as a consequence of the need for savings after the financial crisis in 2008.

Therefore, despite lack of need and the threat to democratic process being cited as reasons for not engaging in training and development, there clearly is a case for greater provision of formal development for politicians, which may in fact act as a mechanism to enhance the fairness and diversity of the democratic process. Korris (2014), argues that one way to successfully induce politicians to engage in development requires leadership and that party leaders need to insist that their new MPs make time to train, oppose the training-resistant culture, and to stand up to the media. Yet there remains the practical challenge of how to identify the areas of knowledge and skill required by politicians in general and design learning activities that accommodate a much broader range of KSAs than typically found in an employee group.

Practical Next Steps

There appears to be growing recognition that new MPs in particular need more support (see Cooper-Thomas, this issue). In their review of British MPs entering Parliament for the first time in 2010, Fox and Korris (2012), found that while most knew a lot about

being a constituency MP from their time campaigning as Parliamentary candidates, few had thought much beyond the point of being elected; either because they had been too busy campaigning or for fear of tempting fate (or appearing hubristic) by assuming they would win. The recent BBC 'fly-on-the-wall' programme, which followed the men and women who work in the British Houses of Parliament provided an excellent insight into the realities of political workings that, on the one hand appear steeped in ritual, history and tradition, and on the other, nothing less than a shambolic collection of ad hoc and often unnecessary practices. It is easy to understand why there are calls for the professionalisation of parliament, including the introduction of modern business practices reminiscent of 'customer service' 'efficiency' and 'performance', and efforts to formalise support for new MPs. Yet Parliament is not a business and care must be taken to understand the unique nature of work within a legislature in order to understand how to modernise practices whilst preserving tradition and respecting democratic process (Silvester & Spicer, 2014).

Most importantly, if formal development opportunities are to be offered, care needs to be taken to determine what and how politicians need to learn. For example, it may not be possible or desirable for new politicians to have equivalent technical knowledge in areas like finance or operations, but they will need a broad understanding of how government works (including constitutional procedures) and how to work effectively in their local political context. Arguably, politicians also need political skill to be able to deal with competing groups, conflicted interests, powerful lobbyists, be able to navigate their environment and achieve their political objectives. Political development therefore poses a fascinating challenge. The following suggestions are just a few of the things that we think should happen.

First, we believe that it is important to improve inclusive learning opportunities for aspiring politicians who lack access to informal sources of information and learning about political roles. To do so much could be learned from existing shadowing schemes and

leadership programmes like those offered by Operation Black Vote, an organisation that aims to enhance ethnic minority political engagement and skills. Secondly, we argue that the political parties need to recognise the importance of development and commit to supporting learning opportunities for new and aspiring politicians. These might involve widening participation in schemes such as the Political Mentoring Programme, launched by the Local Government Group in 2006, and the introduction of formal induction or on-boarding programmes for politicians at local and national level.

We also believe that there is a need to build broader awareness of the knowledge and skills that are important for political roles and to improve cross-party (and potentially non-party) access to activities that can support their development. Although existing work in local government has identified core competences for councillor roles (see Silvester, 2004) more work needs to be done to embed these into learning and training activities and to support their continual evaluation and implementation. It is also important to recognise and protect the legitimate right that that politicians have to choose to engage (or not) in development. Thus politicians should be supported rather than expected to participate in development. This means that greater effort should be placed on helping politicians and aspiring politicians to understand how and why learning can enhance their democratic power rather than diminish it. Tto facilitate politician-led development more use could be made of feedback provided via 360-degree review procedures that allow politicians to identify potential raters and where feedback can remain anonymous and confidential (see Silvester et al., 2014). Although the act of providing feedback remains inherently political, this type of method, where politicians (rather than managers) 'own' feedback can reduce the perceived threat to the democratic process. Equally important is the need for much greater public awareness of the demands, challenges and importance of political roles; as well as more recognition of the need for funding and support for formal training and development.

However, we also argue that there is a critical need for work psychologists to recognise and understand the inherently political nature of learning and development and work more generally. This might include embedding power and politics as core knowledge areas for professional training in work psychology. By relinquishing the widely subscribed assumption that there is a single 'objective' view of work performance, for example, it becomes possible to recognise that politicians (as well as senior professionals in other fields) require the freedom to shape and communicate their own personal definitions of what good performance looks like in their roles. Finally, there is a need for more focus on what business leaders can learn from politicians. While research into the political skill of managers is burgeoning (Ferris, Treadway, Brouer & Munyon, 2012), for example, relatively little draws explicit links with politicians and political work. It is not just politicians who need to navigate complex environments, manage opposing views and mobilise coalitions of support, and we might learn a great deal from politicians that is pertinent to the political nature of senior organisational positions.

Conclusion

To conclude, providing training and development for politicians is potentially problematic precisely because it challenges many of our taken for granted assumptions about the nature of work and learning. Yet politics reminds us that knowledge is power and that those who hold or control access to knowledge also have the potential to change the balance of power, and to determine who else can achieve power and influence. We remain persuaded that the field of psychology as a whole has much to offer the political domain, but it is equally important that work psychologists recognise their own roles as political actors in the workplace.

References

Aguinas, H., and Kraiger, K. (2009). Benefits of training and development for individuals and teams, organizations and society. Annual Review of Psychology, 60, 451-474.

Blass, F.R., Brouer, R.L., Perrewé, P.L., & Ferris, G.R. (2007). Politics understanding and networking ability as a function of mentoring: The roles of gender and race. Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, 14, 93-105.

Cooper-Thomas, H.D. (2015). Becoming an MP. The Psychologist (this volume)

Cooper-Thomas, H.D. & Silvester, J. (2014). Ideas and advice to accelerate the transition for new MPs entering New Zealand's House of Representatives, 1-16. https://margf2011.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/report-to-support-new-mp-adjustment-final.pdf

Doldor, E. (2013). Organizational politics: the missing link to women's progression into managerial roles. In S. Vinnicombe, R.J. Burker, S. Blacke-Beard, & L.L. Moore (eds). *Handbook of Research on Promoting Women's Careers*, (pp. 196-211). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Eagly, A.H. & Carli, L.L. (2007). Women and the labyrinth of leadership. Harvard Business Review, 85, 62–71.

Ferris, G. & Judge, T. (1991). Personnel human resources management: A political influence perspective. Journal of Management, 17, 447-488.

Ferris, G.R., Treadway, D.C., Brouer, R.L., & Munyon, T.P. (2012). Political skill in the organizational sciences. In G.R Ferris & D.C. Treadway (Eds.), Politics in organizations: Theory and research implications (pp. 487-528). New York: Routledge/Taylor and Francis.

Fox, R. & Korris, M. (2012). A fresh start? The orientation and induction of new MPs at Westminster following the 2010 general election. Parliamentary Affairs, 65, 559-575.

King, A. (1981). The rise of the career politician in Britain—and its consequences. British Journal of Political Science, 11, 249-285.

Keep, M. (2010). Characteristics of the new House of Commons. Accessed from http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons/lib/research/key_issues/Key-Issues-Characteristics-of-the-new-House-of-Commons.pdf

Mann, S. (1995). Politics and power in organizations: why women lose out. Leadership and Organization Development Journal, 16, 9–15.

Pickard, J. & Rigby, E. (2015). Cameron rules out restrictions on MPs' second jobs. The Financial Times, February 23rd.

Searing, D.D. (1995). The psychology of political authority: A causal mechanism of political learning through persuasion and manipulation. Political Psychology, 16, 677-696.

Shepherd-Robinson, L. & Lovenduski, J. (2002). Women and candidate selection in British political parties. The Fawcett Society: London.

Silvester, J. (2012). Recruiting politicians: Designing competency-based selection for UK Parliamentary candidates. In A. Weinberg (ed.) The Psychology of Politicians (pp. 21-38). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Silvester, J., & Dykes, C. (2007). Selecting political candidates: A longitudinal study of assessment centre performance and political success in the 2005 UK General Election. Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 80, 11-25.

Silvester, J. & Menges, C. (2011). The Political Mentoring Toolkit. London: ESRC/City University London.

Silvester, J. & Spicer, A. (2014). Leading a Legislature: A Report on Findings. Written evidence submitted to the House of Commons Governance Committee: http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/house-of-commons-governance-committee/house-of-commons-governance/written/15731.html

Silvester, J. & Wyatt, M. (2015 forthcoming). Political effectiveness at work. In C. Viswesvaran, D.S. Ones, N. Anderson and H.K. Sinangil (eds.) Handbook of Industrial Work and Organizational Psychology, Volume 3. London: Sage.

Silvester, J., Wyatt, M. & Randall, R. (2014). Politician Personality, Machiavellianism and Political Skill as Predictors of Performance Ratings in Political Roles. Journal of Occupational & Organizational Psychology, 87, 258-279.

Steinack, K. (2012). Between apathy and enthusiasm: An international comparison of MPs attitudes towards parliamentary training. Parliamentary Affairs, 65, 541-558.

Stevenson, R.L. 1882. Familiar studies of men and books. London: Kessinger.

Weber, M. 1970. In C. W. Mills, & H. H. Gerth (Eds.), Max Weber: Essays in Sociology. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Weinberg, A. & Cooper, C.L. (2003). Stress among national politicians elected to Parliament for the first time. Stress and Health, 19, 111-117.

Wyatt, M. & Silvester, J. (2015). Reflecting on the labyrinth: Investigating Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Leaders' Career Experiences Using Template Analysis. Human Relations, doi:10.1177/0018726714550890