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# Public Leadership Development Facilitation and the Crossroads Blues

## Abstract

The article seeks to make sense of the choices facing the public leadership development facilitator, in design and in-the-moment programme decisions. The challenge is posited as one of situating knowledge of facilitation practices in a critical relationship with the public sector leadership literature and the critical leadership development literature. The article positions public leadership development facilitation as sitting within three pressing dilemmas, or crossroads, concerning: public leadership theory, critical leadership development scholarship and facilitation scholarship. A narrative ethnographic methodology is adopted to explore the constructions of a specific public sector leadership development facilitator as a means of analysing facilitator choices in action. An interpretation of how the facilitator frames and constructs public leadership in relation to the constructions of participants is offered. The article situates facilitator choices as highly political, sitting contextually between the idealism of the public sector literature and the social identifications of participants. The authors offer two dominant forms of facilitation choices (framing and adaptive) as a heuristic for facilitators, practitioners and scholars who wish to reflect further on the role of leadership development in the public realm.

## Keywords

Public leadership; leadership development; facilitation; ethnography; narrative

## Introduction

The infamous tale which serves as the background to Robert Johnson's 'Cross Road Blues' song seems an appropriate metaphor for this article. Encountering the devil at a crossroad, late at night, forced to choose between the hard way to guitar prowess or the tantalising possibility of a seductive shortcut, Johnson is caught at both a metaphorical and literal crossroad. We argue that leadership development facilitators regularly encounter similar dilemmas, although little has been written about how such choices become manifest. Even less has been written about the choices leadership development facilitators face specifically in a public sector context.

This article attempts to address a need in the literature to understand the positioning and decision work of leadership development facilitators in the context of often divergent perspectives offered on public leadership by participants on the one hand and the academic literature on the other.

The leadership development facilitator occupies a unique position in that she or he faces the complexities of participant positioning and contrariness of theorising in an immediate way (face to face with practitioners) and in the moment. Such proximity to the implementers of leadership, we believe, surfaces a number of important choices concerning the facilitation of leadership development.

The focus of this article is to explore how public leadership development facilitators navigate choices in practice, making visible some of the tensions presented in the process. We approach this problem through an ethnographic study of the experiences of a particular public leadership facilitator, analysing the positioning choices he makes and considering the dilemmas raised by these choices. Our intention is practical: to offer practitioners more substantive reflective material to inform their choices (Watson, 2010). We also hope to contribute to the academic literature on public leadership through offering some illumination on the implementation consequences of public leadership theorising.

We begin by considering the area of public leadership, and leadership development, as contested fields of study and practice. Bearing in mind this contested context, the article moves on to consider the role of such a contested environment for the practice of facilitation within public leadership development.

## **Crossroad #1: Public leadership as a contested field**

The current trend within public leadership is towards collaborative forms of leadership (Huxham and Vangen, 2005; O'Reilly and Reed, 2012). Yet collaborative leadership may be viewed as historically

situated amongst other theories of managing and leading which emphasise priorities other than, and even counter to, collaboration.

Collective forms of leadership are referred to in this article under the umbrella term of 'collaborative leadership', although we note that a number of alternative titles could be adopted (Bolden, 2011).

Collaborative leadership can be viewed as a collection of ideas which, at the most fundamental level, challenge the notion that leadership should be viewed as the property of an individual, be it in the form of personality traits or behavioural displays (Grint, 2011). At heart, collaborative interpretations of leadership hypothesise that the responsibilities of leading may be shared amongst a group of people, or even embodied within an agreed process which transcends and continues above and beyond individuals within a group (Grint, 2000).

Collaborative leadership has only relatively recently become more established as a discourse within public leadership (O'Reilly and Reed, 2012). The rise of collaborative leadership can be witnessed in not only scholarly literature, but also in government policy. Despite ideological differences, both Labour and Conservative governments in the UK have attempted to embed collaborative leadership in local policy delivery, with the Total Place and Big Society initiatives, respectively (Grint and Holt, 2011). In New Zealand, the government's flagship Better Public Services initiative is rooted in ideals of collaboration across government agencies (Jackson and Smolović Jones, 2012). Local councils, government departments and agencies, even third sector organisations are being encouraged as never before to collaborate in order to gain traction on social problems previously regarded as either intractable or at least incapable of being addressed through the processes of single organisations (Brookes, 2010 and 2011; Gibney et al, 2009).

Chrislip and Larson's (1994) seminal work on public collaborative leadership is often cited as an influential, idealistic advocacy of the principles of public collaboration. Perhaps as interesting as the book's content is its historical context. Published in the mid 1990s, the book emerged amidst the dominant discourse of New Public Management (NPM) (McLaughlin et al, 2001). The ability of public

managers to add competitive value to their organisations via enterprising managerial freedoms was regarded as the primary challenge of public sector organising under NPM. Although labelled a technical 'management' solution, NPM has been associated with neoliberal ideology, its roots seen as contextually bound with a belief in the power of individual freedoms and choice (Newman, 2005). An evolution of NPM was witnessed in the emergence of transformational leadership theory (Bass and Riggio, 2005) into a public sector context, seen as a means for the previously dry science of management to tap into the emotional, purpose-driven, heart of public organisations (Gunter, 2011). Yet even NPM was observed as a contested idea, with its partial adoption existing alongside more traditional ideals of public accountability and process etc (Hood, 1995).

It would thus be misplaced to characterise any era of public organising as defined by a single theory of managing or organising, even if certain ideas can be identified as more influential than others within scholarship and policy. So it is with public collaborative leadership. One need only look within the umbrella term of 'collaborative leadership' to discover that it can adopt a host of different connotations depending on who one reads or asks (Edwards, 2011; Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Smolović Jones and Grint, 2013; Vangen and Huxham 2003). Collaborative public leadership is not only a contested construct, but also one which exists within a field of alternative positions for leading and managing the public sector.

Viewing public leadership as a contested field brings into focus the challenge for those seeking to develop public leadership. What may at first sight appear as a relatively straightforward translation of leadership theory to development pedagogy and design in fact presents itself as a smorgasbord of sometimes complementary, oftentimes contradictory, theory.

## **Crossroad #2: Leadership development as a contested field**

Broadly speaking, leadership development scholarship has started to consider alternatives to the development of individual traits and competencies (Day, 2001). Alternative approaches prefer to

view leadership as a process shared between people, with the word 'leadership' offering potential for more equal distribution of power within organisations (e.g. Grint, 2005a; Kennedy et al, 2012). Nevertheless, leadership development scholarship remains a field largely dominated by individual-focused research and practice (Day, 2011). The field can be compared to public leadership, where an emerging concern for collective leadership sits alongside, and in tension with, more established individual-focused theory and practice.

The focus on the individual within leadership development, and HR practices more generally, has been criticized as potentially oppressive, a means of controlling the behaviour and actions of employees. For example, Townley (1993 and 1994) has theorized that development technologies can serve as disciplinary mechanisms whereby employers define what is to be regarded as valuable knowledge and seek to know and control employees with ever more sophisticated means of data capture.

Following Rose's (1999) and Rose and Miller's (1992) work, the creep of individualistic culture has been a particular concern for development research within the public sphere. Rose's critique is that public practices, policy and culture have become increasingly concerned with identifying the individual as the source of social problems, yet also as the source of solutions. Such a mindset has become so normalised, it is argued, that it is increasingly difficult to view public problems outside the framework of the individual (Fournier, 2006). For example, when organisations fail, the default position seems to be to search for character flaws of people in positions of leadership responsibility, rather than for more systemic, social solutions (Cruikshank, 1999; Ilcan and Lacey, 2006 and 2011; Žižek, 2009a).

Applying this critical lens to leadership development surfaces its contested and problematic dimensions, exposing how its 'neutral' practices and technologies may serve to embed oppressive organisational norms (Edwards et al, 2013). For example, Gagnon (2008) has demonstrated how leadership development programmes may act as a way of solidifying oppressive power relations

between employees and employers. Programmes, she states, can exploit insecurity and embed ruthless competitive norms. More recently, Tomlinson et al (2013) have theorised that leadership development can act as a means of 'symbolic violence'. Such violence, they state, occurs through an appeal to the vanity of managers. Being a 'leader' is viewed as more glamorous than being a 'manager' or 'administrator' (see also Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003). Such seduction, they state, enables the entrenchment of centralised control and a culture of competition through the acquisition of capital, in this case self-capital.

Although the dominant concern of critical scholars has been to highlight the possibility for oppression in individual-focused leadership development, alternative contributions have made the case for the individual as a potential site of emancipation. Swan (2008, 2010) views the personal as a potential source of political engagement. Personal therapeutic interventions, according to Swan (2010), can act as a safety valve for the expression of angst brought about through a capitalist over-preoccupation with individual responsibility (Newman, 2005; Shamir, 2008). Moreover, as a feminist scholar, she does not view a focus on individuals in management and leadership development as necessarily oppressive. Her position is that, if taken as part of a more holistic development process, a focus on the personal may offer valuable insights into larger political concerns (see also Mills, 2000; Watson, 2008). Such is the concern of reflexivity within the development of management and leadership, a means for participants to view their position within social and organisational power relations through questioning their individually-felt and experienced responses (Cunliffe, 2002 and 2004).

Leadership development programmes have been theorised as one means of connecting the personal and organisational. For example, Lord and Hall (2005) and Day and Harrison (2007) have postulated that leadership development ought to be viewed as a continuum whereby participants will need to first think of themselves as individuals in leadership terms before they can move on to consider their role in collective forms of leadership.

As suspicious as we are of work which claims discrete personal and collective stages of development, what is indicated is that participants may hold a wide array of meanings for leadership work. This is a view of leadership development participants confirmed by Ford et al (2008) and Ford and Harding (2007). Participants do not enter leadership development programmes as a blank sheet but do so bearing the weight of a lifetime of cultural images of what it means to lead. Moreover, such images are drawn from popular culture, which tends to view leadership as individual, heroic and inspirational. To expect participants to simply drop all previous preconceptions regarding leadership and adopt a new, collaborative identity seems unrealistic. Hence a more recent concern in the leadership development literature with exploring how development may serve as an experimental ground for participants to work with their self and organisational identities (Carroll and Levy, 2010; Carroll and Simpson, 2012).

In summary, the nature of what constitutes a helpful leadership development experience is contested, and this contestation has chiefly been concerned with the figure of the individual participant. Moreover, recent research has drawn attention to the complex positioning of participants in relation to leadership: they do not view leadership in clear-cut, single-theory terms.

### **Crossroad #3: Process and content choices for facilitation**

So how does the literature deal with the concept of facilitation within an environment of contested leadership and leadership development theory? The short answer is that it does not address the issue directly but provides clues about the kinds of choices leadership developers may face in practice.

Facilitation as a concept is a relatively recent phenomenon, stemming from post-WWII humanist psychology (Perriton, 2007). The practice of facilitating groups has its origins in therapeutic practice and much of the literature tends towards a concern with facilitators developing self-awareness of their own behaviour within a learning group (Knowles, 1990; Rogers, 1990). The literature on



facilitation has largely taken the form of best practice guides, with the language of such guides often leaving the impression that process is something which can be perfected in isolation to content expertise (Perriton, 2007). For example, readers are urged to develop a 'training kit' (Bendaly, 2000) or a 'facilitator's toolkit' (Havergal and Edmonstone, 1999) in order to learn 'faultless facilitation' (Hart, 1991). The image of a toolkit or manual encourages the view of a craft of facilitation which is separable from knowledge of subject.

This 'neutral stance' of facilitation (Gregory and Romm, 2001) does not sit well with the experiences of many facilitators working within leadership development (Raelin, 2006). Such facilitation professionals bring a range of content expertise to their roles, from on-the-job management experience to scholarly proficiency in the field (Swan, 2010). That said, we do not wish to be dismissive of group process expertise. Our experiences suggest that facilitation of public leadership development is a practice whereby process work is informed by content expertise, and vice versa.

The convergence of content-process concerns is often felt when facilitators are faced with choices about which directions and points raised by participants to underline and explore (Cooren et al, 2006; Raelin, 2006). These choices are magnified within a public sector context where participant constructions of leadership may differ from, support or contradict the current emphasis in the literature on collaborative leadership.

To conclude this review, it is our contention that leadership development facilitator choices are made more problematic in three ways:

1. Through the contested nature of public leadership theory – both in terms of the relatively recent rise of collaborative leadership and the contested nature of collaboration itself.
2. Through the contested nature of leadership development theory and practice, manifesting in concerns with the exercising of power over individual participants. The picture is further

complicated through a view of participants as possessing varied and often contradictory views concerning the meaning and utility of leadership.

3. Through a deficit of knowledge concerning the role of the leadership development facilitator. Specifically, how concerns with content expertise and care for process should be balanced in practice.

The remainder of the article is concerned with considering how these three issues may manifest in the choices made by public leadership development facilitators and in surfacing how these choices may appear in practice.

## The research setting

The data presented is drawn from a broader ethnographic study of public leadership development programmes conducted over a three-year period in both the United Kingdom and New Zealand.

The data presented in this article is drawn from one of the four programmes observed, the Public Leadership Programme (PLP) in New Zealand. Like many other western democracies, New Zealand policymakers are currently advocating a more collaborative form of leadership in the design and delivery of services. Similarly to other national contexts, New Zealand public servants are also discovering that implementing collaborative forms of leadership involves unsettling dominant paradigms of public organising, asking questions about the purpose and nature of public policy and services which may challenge existing means of conceptualising public problems, as well as the dominant leadership identities held by public managers (Grint and Holt, 2011; Jackson and Smolović Jones, 2012).

The PLP is funded by central government but delivered through a specialist government agency and aimed at middle managers within civil service departments and government agencies. Although the facilitation choices highlighted in the literature review and data section to follow were visible in the larger study, we chose to focus on a single programme (the PLP) and the experiences of one

facilitator in particular in order to offer a greater depth of insight. We chose to focus specifically on the PLP as the facilitator, Frank, appeared particularly attuned to the choices inherent in facilitating the leadership development of public sector managers. Reflecting the move to collaborative leadership highlighted in the literature review, the PLP was a programme aimed at developing leadership not only as the property of an individual but as a capacity between government agencies and departments, hence the broad cross-section of participants involved.

## Methodological summary

We adopt narrative ethnography as a methodology for this study (Watson and Watson, 2012), which seeks to offer a rich account of the research setting through immersion in the field of study, providing readers with a sense of the lived experience of facilitating a leadership development programme (Van Maanen, 2010 and 2011; Watson, 2010), or a 'room with a view' (Cunliffe, 2010: 226) of the challenges of designing and facilitating leadership development. Beyond this more traditional view of ethnography, narrative ethnography is also interested in how research participants construct their experiences, specifically with attempts by actors to define meaning, to create a more broadly accepted meta-narrative (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009). Narrative ethnographers are particularly interested in the process of objectification, or how a particular narrative may undergo the process of earning wider acceptance (Watson, 2009). To assist in this task of exploring how a particular meta-narrative is constructed and contested, narrative ethnography draws on the analytical methods of discourse analysis (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2011; Georgakopoulou, 2007; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013) because narrative ethnographers tend to believe that narratives are not constructed by individuals in isolated moments but may be seen as constructed relationally, over time.

In the context of this study, the primary author was embedded in the field in an observational role. His strategy was to remain intentionally low-key, for example seating himself at the fringes of the

group, only speaking in open sessions when invited to do so by facilitators or programme participants. Emphasis was placed upon not only the strategies and responses adopted during the formal programme but also upon side conversations with participants during breaks and between development engagements via email and telephone.

Regular informal conversations were held with the programme's main facilitator, Frank, throughout the duration of the eight-month programme. In addition one formal interview was conducted with Frank during the initial stages of the programme in order to glean from him his development and design preferences. As stated, Frank was the lead facilitator for the programme, although he was supported by another facilitator and guest presenters. The government provider was also influential in terms of informing content priorities. We therefore acknowledge that some design decisions and ad-hoc decisions regarding the unfolding of the programme were out of Frank's direct control: for example, in terms of presenter responses to participant questions. Nevertheless, primary responsibility for the design of the programme and for maintaining the overall programme narrative lay with Frank.

The programme began with five days of intensive development at a residential location, which the primary author attended in full. An additional full working week (five full observation days) was spent by the researcher in the offices of the government leadership development provider responsible for delivering the PLP. The researcher was granted access to meetings and members of staff for interview, which served as valuable contextual background for the observation of the programme. Following the 10 days of observation (provider offices and programme), seven coaching sessions between programme facilitators and participants were observed. In addition, four half-day action learning sessions were observed. In total, 40 interviews were conducted, with programme participants (34), staff members within the development delivery organisation with involvement in the programme management (four) and facilitators (two). Notes of observations were recorded by the primary researcher using teeline shorthand. Interviews were audio recorded.

Discourse analysis of narratives was adopted as a means of data analysis which might assist in the establishing of connections between the textual, organisational and social dynamics at play in the field (Georgakopoulou, 2007; Krzyzanowski and Wodak, 2008; Wagner and Wodak, 2006; Wodak and Kryzanowski, 2007). A fundamental tenet of discourse analysis is that it seeks to explore how the broader political terrain shapes everyday discursive practice and, in turn, how everyday discursive practice may influence the broader political landscape (Fairclough, 1992; Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007). We were thus particularly interested in linguistic constructions which seemed to indicate that the facilitator and programme participants were dealing with issues concerning the meaning and purpose of leadership. In practical terms, such an analysis focused on the discursive strategies, argumentation structure and grammatical categories adopted by speakers (Krzyzanowski and Wodak, 2008; Wagner and Wodak, 2006). In addition, we were interested in how speakers represented themselves and others in their speech, as such discursive representation may be said to indicate an exercising of power (Shuman, 2005 and 2010), as speakers attempt to construct both self and other identity in relation to the organisational and social context in hand. In other words, discourse analysis of narratives in an ethnographic context is concerned with how textual deployment is influenced by, and in turn seeks to influence, the broader political and organisational environment.

In terms of episode selection, we identified each narrative appearing in the field notes and interview transcripts, with 'narrative episode' defined as any passage of text which was structured in a 'time-related sequence' (a beginning, middle and end) (Watson, 2009: 429), involving characters and an underlying purpose (a moral of the tale). Each episode was firstly analysed in terms of whether the text presented the speaker with several choices. Could the facilitator have chosen one course of action, or particular linguistic deployment, over another and what might the consequences of certain decisions have entailed? We were particularly guided in our selection by narratives which presented an intensification of textual choices. By intensification we do not refer to the number of choices presented but to episodes which were indicative of choices which appeared to signal the

shaping of the broader, meta-narrative – in terms of linguistic and content themes which were returned to or re-emphasised. Our selection was further guided through our frequent conversations with the facilitator and with programme participants as to which moments they believed illustrated well the shaping of the programme meta-narrative.

## Facilitation choices in practice

### **The facilitator**

Leading the PLP as facilitator was Frank. Quietly spoken, warm and inclusive, he was both a convincing speaker in large groups and had a way of capturing individual participants in one-on-one conversations. The surroundings of the development programme seemed to complement Frank's earthy charm: a peaceful stately home in the semi-rural surrounds of a traffic-fuelled, major city. Its rolling lawns, crafted wrought-iron balcony and the homely welcome of its owners seemed an extension of Frank's own persona.

What was particularly interesting to us about Frank was his unwillingness to allow his narrative on leadership to be restricted by the personal/collective dyad. Far from viewing personal development as distracting, let alone damaging, Frank saw the personal as a potentially powerful means of connecting with participants. His logic was that for participants to engage with organisational and social solutions, they needed to feel and connect to their own personal experiences, both inside and outside the workplace.

Such a position as a facilitator offered potential for a sophisticated development narrative. Yet through attempting to work with the complexities of public leadership thought, his positioning also surfaced several important tensions and dilemmas. One of these tensions was undoubtedly the balancing of the needs of the sponsors of the programme (the government agency tasked with delivery) with what Frank felt was an appropriate design for the PLP. We do not claim that such a tension was problematic in the sense of any major disagreement existing between Frank and his

sponsor. The needs of the government agency were guided by central government's push towards more collaborative forms of leadership. Frank supported this emphasis but also recognised that the position of individual programme participants may be more complex and problematic, requiring a nuanced approach to the issue of collaboration. While the organisational context of development programmes is not the primary focus of this study, it is worth noting that this (constructive) tension between programme sponsors and facilitator existed as one further factor informing facilitator choice.

The remainder of this section will analyse points at which Frank was presented with important facilitation decisions as he worked both with leadership theory and the positioning of participants. Three episodes which seemed particularly important regarding the decisions and dilemmas faced by Frank as a facilitator were identified. We present these episodes as events which seem to reflect two broad categories of facilitator choice: framing choices and adaptive choices.

### **Framing and adaptive choices**

When building theory from our field observations we were struck by the political nature of many of the choices facing leadership development facilitators. Tempted as we were to name 'politics' as one choice amongst many, we felt that doing so would overlook the pervasiveness of the political in the choices facing developers of leadership in the public sector. All the choices we present are strongly political ones, as they involve navigating the ideological constructs of participants, theorists, organisations and politicians.

The political and contested nature of these choices, we believe, is captured well in our theorising of framing and adaptive choices. Plainly put, framing choices are those representing a facilitator's presentation of the problem of 'public leadership', meaning what 'leadership' is there to achieve, what kind of acts can be defined as 'leadership' and who is responsible for these acts. Adaptive choices concern the degree to which facilitators maintain discomfort amongst participants. Drawn

from Heifetz's theory of adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz and Linsky, 2002), they concern the extent to which facilitators attempt to maintain participants in a productive state of discomfort. The work of facilitation presents itself in choices regarding when participants should be pushed into discomfort and when moments of consolidation might be considered. The following episodes are presented in order to draw out some of the more detailed issues inherent within framing and adaptive choices.

### **Framing choices: How to contextualise the importance of leadership?**

The following narrative represents Frank's initial construction of the purpose of the PLP:

There is a need for a new type of leadership. It's easy to establish our lives through the accumulation of consumer durables as a way of climbing through society, but it's also easy to lose your way. The poet and leadership writer David Whyte has this heartbreaking but incredibly powerful quote from one of his participants, an ordinary person, someone who had worked hard and done well in a big corporate for many years, but was profoundly unsatisfied. She said, "10 years ago I turned my face for a moment and it became my life." At the moment we are deepening our vocabulary around the recession but it is about rationality, structure and cost. In some ways many organizations need more of that.

But it is not the leadership of a corporate or political elite that will ultimately revitalise the world. Rather, it is the personal leadership of ordinary people that will make the final difference. Who can tell what would be the positive impact of a few thousand people finding more soul and vitality in their lives as the people I've spoken with have done?

We need personal foundations for leadership. A manager who has been on this programme told us: "I had underestimated the impact my personal leadership has on my organisational leadership. I've learnt about the need for personal space and personal reading. I can't believe how much that adds to my life."



As a first analytic step, we will analyse the choices made by Frank in his framing work and point to the dilemmas this narrative highlight for a development practitioner. As a second step, we will analyse the form of this narrative, the technical work of Frank's language. Having made his more macro facilitator choices, what are the textual choices available to this facilitator?

The first decision open to Frank in his framing is how to contextually situate his view of leadership and the imperative for its development. As seen, Frank introduces a political frame early on – dissatisfaction with contemporary consumerist society. Not to have touched upon the political would perhaps have been a development experience recognised by participants as more orthodox.

Nevertheless, perhaps to take a position free or above ideology is in itself a form of ideological positioning, that of a technical expert knowing better than those attuned to political values and concerns (Žižek, 2009b).

Whether or not to apply a political frame to development narratives is an issue which has troubled us in our experiences of facilitation. The usual strategy is to insert a political frame more gradually, so as to gauge the mood of the group. Yet as already alluded to, perhaps such a strategy is already an ideological one. Presenting issues as technical may be viewed as a means of attempting to paper over the more complex, political dimensions of a problem (Grint, 2005b). The presumption with a technical framing is that we can somehow rise above ideology. But of course we know that leadership theory is woven with ideology: for example, that collaborative leadership models suggest at least an affinity for communal values.

The choice made by Frank was to act boldly, to stake his narrative claim for leadership and its development, drawing upon his experiences and talents for connecting with an audience. Through making such a choice Frank entered the heart of the tension evident in the literature between the

personal, collective and the political. Referencing this debate, it would appear that two broad readings of Frank's framing are possible, a fact Frank, as a reflective practitioner, was aware of.

One reading of this initial framing would be to characterise it as a substantial example of the mobilisation of a cultural fixation with the personal at the expense of the systemic and communal. The suspicious part of Frank's thinking alerted him to the accusation that addressing personal leadership so early in a programme risked over-simplifying the tensions and complexities associated with leadership.

An alternative reading might interpret this narrative as an attempt to encourage the agency of participants within an environment which appears to be eroding the ability of participants to act in leadership. Through romanticising the experiences of participants, Frank is inviting them to *feel* their frustration with the status quo. It is an invitation to over-identify (Žižek, 2009b), to feel the excess of a public sphere where lack of communal connection, in Frank's opinion, has become problematic.

Each choice faced by Frank held important consequences for the remainder of the programme. Perhaps the most challenging implication for the development facilitator is that opting out of confronting difficult issues carries as many consequences as opting in. We have experienced situations where for the best of intentions (group stability, participant confidence) we have allowed a participant contribution we view as unhelpful to slide. The act of non-action holds consequences for facilitation: it can muddy the narrative waters, sow confusion or leave participants with the impression that leadership is somehow an ideologically loose concept where one interpretation is as valid as another.

Sitting beneath Frank's meta-decisions regarding the political (or otherwise), individual (or collective?) positioning of the programme lay a series of more micro, linguistic choices. The dilemma faced by Frank is a well-trodden one connected to the deployment of rhetoric. As far back as classical times, Greek philosophers debated the appropriateness of deploying the arts of rhetoric in

teaching. While Plato warned of the dangers of irrational (manipulative) rhetoric overcoming the rational, Aristotle was more pragmatic, arguing that a moral leader ought to be exposed to the arts available to (less honest) competitors (Grint, 1997). The choice for a development facilitator is to what extent to deploy rhetorical devices and to what extent should an argument be allowed to speak for itself.

Frank could have presented his framing quite differently. Open to him was the possibility of hard data (numbers, graphs etc) as a means of persuading his audience that either current approaches to leadership were inadequate, or that his belief in personal agency was supported by hard data.

Frank's chosen path was to construct a more qualitative, narrative-based pitch.

Sitting in the audience for this speech, it was undoubtedly an impressively seductive literary framing. The pointed opening sentence offers drama – a call for newness. The dramatic introduction is quickly reinforced through the tragic romanticism of art. Frank does not appeal to hard data, but to the emotion of poetry. A further twist occurs as Frank appropriates the voice of the “ordinary person”. This appropriation fits with Shuman's (2010) notion of an exercise of power in narrative, as Frank is now more than Frank, he is Frank plus “ordinary person”, having co-opted the voice of this manager. Poetry mingles with the personal (ordinary manager). Furthermore, this manager is pitched as being just like the participants listening on. Their assumed existential angst is elevated to a realm of the poetic, the beautiful.

The extended coda of the narrative involves Frank offering a solution to this capitalism-fuelled existential crisis. The coda begins with a deepening of the notion of “ordinary people”. Further understanding of this category is posited through a differentiation between the ‘ordinary’ and an ‘elite’. Apocalyptic notions of a consumerist society out of control are answered with the unexpected solution of the hope offered by ordinary, decent managers.

Frank's framing choice here offers an interesting twist on a common theme within critical leadership studies, that as leadership seems to represent something intangible and even metaphysical, it is also in practical terms more difficult to scrutinise and hold to account (O'Reilly and Reed, 2012).

'Leadership' may thus be adopted as a potentially manipulative framing related to the unquestioned superiority of senior managers (Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996; Grint, 2000). Yet Frank's strategy is to draw on a romanticised, metaphysical leadership in order to lend a certain tragic beauty to the position of the middle manager (Sims, 2003). The question here is the extent to which such framing choices assist participants in better seeing their position within a larger, political context. Indeed, if as listeners we tend to respond more to narratives than simple 'facts' (Gabriel, 2000), then we should think more carefully about who populates our facilitation narratives. Who are we offering as examples and role models? Framing leadership in terms of famed world leaders or celebrity CEOs might in the short term boost participant evaluation satisfaction scores but offer little in terms of practical utility.

#### **Adaptive choices: When participants talk back**

There is a risk of course, in discussing facilitator choices, that we over-emphasise the discretion of facilitators to build a narrative of leadership and under-emphasise the contested environment of leadership development. In fact, in the case of the PLP, participants were wary of their position within the narrative Frank presented. Such wariness was not directed at the political positioning of Frank but more specifically with their own capacity to discover a purpose and voice within their leadership. In particular, participants were cautious of their ability to lead collaboration in organisations which historically held alternative priorities.

At a macro level, participants identified with Frank's narrative connecting the personal and political/organisational. For example, one participant, Jan, a younger manager, wrapped up concerns with her home life (neglecting her children etc) with concerns about not stepping confidently into her male-dominated workplace. Another participant connected her feelings of grief related to

members of her family passing away with a sense of grief at her perceived incapacity to act in leadership at work, that her organisation seemed paralysed by a state of sadness following a difficult change project and staff redundancies. These participants connected their personal feelings of vulnerability with larger organisational issues. Such a reading more closely resembles the 'personal is political' stream of thought within feminism (e.g. Swan, 2008b; Young, 2011) than with the critique of personal development as distracting from critical thought.

At a micro-discursive level participants evoked both a connection between personal and organisational, and a tentativeness regarding their own leadership potential. Connecting the personal to the organisational, albeit uncertainly and tentatively, was particularly highlighted through the experiences of another manager, David, who worked in policy. He identified with the view of isolation painted by Frank, but was uncertain where this left him regarding his own job. Addressing the group, David mirrored Frank's affinity to literature, quoting Hamlet in his positioning of his leadership thinking:

Let me share some lines with you from Hamlet: "There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all. Since no man knows aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? Let be."

I have been trembling on the brink, staring over the edge and thinking about whether I can go further, whether I have it in me to go further. I need to step confidently into my work and my leadership role. "If it be not now, yet it will come – the readiness is all." I want to be in a more senior policy role, but in the meantime to step more authoritatively and to articulate my values more in my present role. I need to develop an activity that is just for me. I need to develop more peer influence across my agency, to build alliances and relationships which are purposeful.

This participant's voice seemed a salient example of the group's positioning between organisational and personal. Equating himself with a small bird, a sparrow, is striking. Sparrows are a common bird in New Zealand and David was aware of their characteristics. They are seemingly vulnerable creatures, yet are in fact durable, effective foragers. The other powerful image evoked in this passage is that of "trembling on the brink". While reference to Hamlet seems to evoke grand imagery, his self-positioning stands in contrast, as that of a small, frightened animal uncertain about his own capacity for leadership. It is worth noting here that the story of Hamlet is one frequently drawn upon by psychoanalytic writers to signal a struggle with authority. Why did Hamlet falter when faced with the opportunity to murder Claudius? Was it connected to his hesitation to assume the burden of the primal father figure? In other words, what may be signalled here is the dilemma of whether or not to accept the psychical burdens and narcissistic possibilities offered by leadership (Jones, 1976). Such a dilemma is highlighted within a framework of collaborative leadership. There is no authority figure to tell David what to do. His decision is to eventually step "over the edge" and to assert his presence more forcefully. At this point his language switches from literary to practical statements of intent: "I want to", "I need to".

The image of a participant standing on the edge of a cliff brings to the fore a key series of dilemmas for the leadership development facilitator. At play here are a number of participants who have, on the one hand, seen their own position within a larger system more clearly. Yet on the other hand such positioning has led them to vulnerability.

The facilitation decision present is whether to engage participants further through the personal, to seek some form of closure. As discussed, such an approach may lead to a form of individual satisfaction, yet ultimately its effects might be limited (at least within the timeframe of the development intervention), with development reserved for the personal domain (self, family) of each individual. Or, the facilitator may seek to make more explicit and practical the link between the personal and organisational/social. Such a decision appears as practical (what will be the measurable

outcome of the programme?) and ethical (is it fair to push participants further along an uncomfortable line of reflection?).

Perhaps uncharacteristically for Frank, in this regard he leaned towards caution. At the back of Frank's mind of course was the knowledge that the programme's action learning component offered extra time for organisation-focused leadership development. Frank's choice, when presented with participants unable to move beyond the personal, was one of support and reinforcement. An example of his caution appeared in a one-to-one coaching session observed by the field researcher.

Helen, a senior manager, was experiencing difficulties at work and in her personal life.

Frank: So how are you doing?

Helen: I'm exhausted to be honest. My work is slipping, my child is ill ... My brother died recently. It's tiring. The worst thing is that I know my leadership is not as good as it should be at the moment and I can feel it slipping more ... I feel sad about the state of my team and about the state of my organisation. We have plans for restructuring. I think it is necessary. I'm not sure it will really happen because ... I can't really influence my boss to think in different ways because he has been there for so long ... [her voice starts to trail off]

Frank: Ok, [pause] ... Let's focus on you. You, just you.

In this extract, a seemingly straightforward question from Frank opens a flood of personal angst, wrapped within organisational problems. Following the critical literature, Frank's response might have been to bypass the personal and to focus Helen on her work-based issues. Her home life would be seen as a distraction from the aims of the programme, developing organisational leadership. A second option might be to attempt to work through the personal and organisational in tandem. Frank, however, chooses a third option – to focus on the personal. As the session proceeded, the organisational became increasingly placed in the background (“You, just you”). Helen's body language transitioned from tense to inquisitive as she considered the possibility that she might

indulge some of her own personal wishes, such as an escape to a wilderness spot and some time for her favourite music and literature. When questioned about this episode, Frank's position was that some participants need to confront only the personal before they can move on. They can become stuck, he believed. In his view, to have pushed the personal aside at this stage in Helen's development risked alienating the participant and belittling her position. The adaptive challenge with Helen, Frank believed, could be managed more gradually throughout the duration of the programme.

It is not our intention to state whether this stance from Frank is correct or not, but to demonstrate how a single moment in an otherwise innocuous development intervention – a one-on-one coaching session – can open possibilities, perils and dilemmas for the development facilitator. Facilitators work with human participants and related ethical dilemmas are rarely addressed through an impersonal leadership literature. Moreover, the subtlety of managing an adaptive relationship over the course of a whole development intervention usually lasting several months, or even years, is frequently lost in an unhelpful debate expressed in binary terms of whether or not to adopt a personal or collective focus.

### **Framing and adaptive choices collide: When is personal agency too agentic?**

Exercises within leadership and management development are commonly drawn upon by facilitators for two primary reasons. The first is to embed learning introduced into a programme. The second is to create an experience which facilitates a more felt sense of learning difficult to capture within the confines of a lecture, or discussion.

Frank drew on development exercises as a means of encouraging participants to view themselves as active agents within leadership, rather than as passive recipients of the meaning making of others. It was his intention to encourage participants to relate their own everyday actions to larger professional decisions.



The exercise drawn on here took place on a lawn below the main activity room. The setting seemed to contribute to a feeling of serenity and relaxation: rolling green lawns, clear sky and sound of the local crickets blending with Frank's melodious delivery.

Participants were asked to close their eyes and visualise the space which they inhabited on the day of their birth. They were invited to picture a line along the lawn, representing their life path and to choose a spot further along that would represent where they were in the present. They were asked to walk along that line, pausing at particular points to take notes, on paper, of "times of absolute peak experience, great moments of [their] lives".

Some of the participants sat down at their 'peak experience moments', others stood. It was conducted in silence, with only the sound of surrounding nature as an accompaniment. As participants reached their present-moment 'spaces', some had progressed far down their 'lines', others significantly less, demonstrating their belief that most of their peak experiences were yet to occur. Participants were asked to reflect on what their experiences meant and about what was important to them in their working and personal lives.

Participants were asked to walk further along their 'lines' to a moment in which they would visualise the day of their retirement. They were asked to remain at that spot and look back down their 'lines', over their careers and lives. They were asked:

What kind of work were you doing? What's happening for you now, in your own lives that might give you that sense of satisfaction? What are some of the things you have had to do to get to that point of satisfaction? What are the things you will have to do between now and then to really have this fulfilling experience?

Participants were invited to think of their development in the context of their families and loved ones, an invitation charged with an emotional tone of voice:

Think about yourself as a young person, the parents, grandparents and all the effort and resources that have been invested in you to bring you to where you are today. Look back through time. What hopes did they have for you in what you might achieve in the world? If that older, wiser you walked up to you now, what advice would they now give you about the way you live?

The intended effect of this framing is to lead participants to a point where they regard themselves as capable of affecting control over their own decisions in leadership and career. The choice presented to Frank initially of course is whether to encourage such thoughts at all. This is an adaptive choice. Danger presents in the possibility that participants may develop an over-inflated sense of their capacity both to determine their own pathways through organisational leadership, but also to challenge established ways of leading and power relationships.

The extent to which facilitators encourage the expectations of participants can be identified as a key tension. On the one hand, to present a programme as aimed at marginal change in practice, content to leave power structures largely unchallenged, seems overly conservative. On the other hand, over-emphasising what is possible for an individual or small group of participants to achieve as a result of a single development intervention is also a problematic stance. This is an ethical dilemma: how far should participants be encouraged to take their leadership and to what extent can a development facilitator offer support?

We have worked inside organisations where participants have expressed unease regarding the safety of speaking up, of challenging power. We have also made the mistake of seeming dismissive of such concerns – “you never know until you try!” Yet adopting such a stance is inconsiderate of the material realities of working amidst power.

Frank’s decision was to encourage a significant sense of agency amongst his participants. It is a view he holds strongly, that in general people in organisations underestimate the power of their own

actions and voices. An alternative approach might have been to play down a sense of agency. Such a strategy might have encouraged a series of discussions on the role of the individual manager within a larger system – the possibilities and the realpolitik of acting in organisations. Perhaps this approach could be viewed as conservative, but also perhaps as pragmatic.

Nevertheless, as stated, Frank chose an alternative strategy, one he believed to be more congruent with his beliefs regarding organisational change and in keeping with the level of support available to participants (a programme of coaching and action learning in addition to the more formal development sessions).

The macro choice for Frank in this exercise was therefore the extent to which he encouraged the agency and ambition of his participants. We now move on to a more micro analysis of the linguistic choices open to Frank.

What strikes us about the linguistic work of Frank is its ambition. For the duration of the exercise Frank seeks to create, through the language and form of his exercise, a suspension of time and space. In effect, participants are invited to participate in their own story construction.

First, an inside and an outside are evoked by the facilitator. The outside world may be busy, even anxiety-inducing, to the point where people feel that they have little control over their own decisions. Inside this development arena, a different environment is generated (pleasant scenery, evocative facilitator language etc). The outside world is permitted to enter, but only on the terms of the facilitator and participants.

Second, both time and space appear to be under the control of participants. They enact this effect through the carving out of physical space on the lawn – where in a ‘timeline’ they believe themselves to be situated, and so on. Time is also seen as flexible, with participants determining how long to dwell over particular events in the past, present and future. It is undoubtedly the case that participants, in the outside world, do not enjoy such discretion over the course of their careers.

Yet it would be inadequate indeed within a development programme to suggest that participants have only limited control over their own decisions, their own capacity to challenge the status quo. The choice of Frank to seek to enhance the agency of his participants is thus enriched through his meta and micro-positioning of the development exercise.

Drawing on the case of Frank and the PLP, what becomes visible is a series of choices available to development facilitators in relation to the positioning of development in a programme ostensibly aimed at developing more collaborative leadership. Drawing on our experience as ethnographic researchers, we theorised two particular categories of facilitator choices which we believed assisted us in drawing out the political, ethical and practical nature of the work of the leadership development facilitator: framing choices and adaptive choices. The remainder of the article is dedicated to a consideration of how this theorisation of choices may be worked with in theory and practice.

## Conclusion: Living with leadership development at the crossroads

With public leadership literature and public policy increasingly moving towards more of an emphasis on cross-organisational and collaborative leadership, leadership development facilitators may be seen as occupying a space between this stance and the everyday leadership identifications, anxieties and practices of public managers. The role and practice of facilitation may thus be viewed as a pinch-point, where theorising of public leadership meets the everyday concerns of professionals. How this role is conceptualised and supported is an underdeveloped yet crucial concern if governments wish to implement a change in the dominant leadership practices of their departments and agencies. Hence a need to better understand the choices leadership development facilitators face in their practice.

Framing choices can of course be seen as continuous choices within leadership development (Carroll and Simpson, 2012), those decisions we make concerning how certain sessions are pitched, the

lessons we glean from plenary discussions or exercise debriefs. The micro-textual decisions made by facilitators, while superficially presenting as minor choices, provide hints to the broader positioning of development facilitation. We suggest that holding the ideological as an explicit reflective frame may prove valuable in navigating both design and in-the-moment framing decisions.

Discussion of such political positioning highlights an ethical concern for the role of the facilitator. Namely, if the facilitator sits between the demands of organisation and the practice and values of programme participants, such a position may be characterised as a charged one. This leadership 'pinch-point' can be thought of as one important place in which theory and practice meet. We are drawn to this notion of a 'pinch' as it seems to capture our feelings while facilitating leadership development, the pang of pain as our theorising on leadership meets contrary views and experiences. The default of most facilitators in such a situation might be to consider how she/he might have positioned content differently or adopted an alternative pedagogical approach. While such considerations are undoubtedly important, it is perhaps of some comfort to situate such thinking within the context of the 'pinch' of facilitation, the knowledge that the response of programme participants to framing choices may have as much to do with the position the facilitator occupies in the process of organisation or sector change as it does with individual design and delivery choices.

Moments of confusion and disagreement as a disruptive frame is offered may in fact prove a welcome sign that the facilitator is experiencing a developmental relationship with participants. We thus urge facilitators to think of their framing activity within such a political context as a means of both more effectively situating their programmes in the context of sector and as a means of easing the burden of discomfort often experienced when one faces a sceptical or confused group of programme participants.

Adopting a strategy of reflexive engagement in facilitation framing choices would imply that the facilitator makes public his/her choices, engaging participants in why certain frames were chosen

over others (Cunliffe, 2002 and 2004). Such a process, we believe, would not only indicate a more inclusive, democratic development experience but also draw out a key developmental feature of collaborative leadership. Namely, that if collaborative leadership requires the questioning of existing ideological positions then perhaps it is sensible that the facilitator of collaborative leadership development is able to model some of the problems and possibilities of such framing choices in action.

In a more practical and immediate sense, some literature exists to guide both facilitators and practitioners of leadership regarding the practice of framing (e.g. Carroll and Simpson, 2012; Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996). Nevertheless, perhaps this study has highlighted the importance of further applied research which focuses more explicitly on the detailed dynamics of facilitation framing.

Focusing on adaptive choices in facilitation highlights important ethical questions related to the agency of programme participants. A leadership development programme would appear as limited indeed if it did not encourage its participants to approach major issues of leadership within and outside their organisations. Indeed, change must originate somewhere and why not with managers enrolled in a leadership development programme? Yet the danger inherent in agency is the possibility of over-stating the capacity of any individual or small group of generating major structural change and underplaying the possibility that the act of leading may as often be driven by the history, culture, followers, even geography of an organisation (Grint, 2005b; Ladkin, 2010).

We therefore urge a balanced stance in approaching such adaptive choices within leadership development. To push participants to focus largely on their own agency above the context seems irresponsible and ethically problematic. Likewise, to swamp programme participants with structural influences might generate a degree of fatalism. Such choices for development facilitators are pragmatic matters which can only be judged through careful research into the state of power relations within the organisational context of a participant.

Thinking of adaptive choices over the course of an entire development engagement can lead the facilitator to think more creatively not only about moments of intensification and easing of heat but also what may be realistic for participants to experiment with between engagements with the facilitator, at work. How can a facilitator plan adaptive interventions in order to generate energy and enthusiasm for workplace experimentation in a way that will create momentum but not overwhelm?

Decisions concerning whether to focus on the personal, the collective, or somewhere in between, we see as adaptive choices. A personal focus can offer a place of consolidation, of rest from the co-constructed challenge of collaborative leadership. Žižek (2009b) would hold such moments as fantasies, as they offer a false sense of comfort and completion, that the problem is solved. Yet fantasies may also be held as valuable sources of recuperation from the intensity of a challenging development experience.

After all, reflecting on individual agency in the context of collaborative leadership generates a series of questions regarding the capability and authority of individual leaders to instigate and embed leadership. If we no longer have a figure of authority to tell us what to do and to reassure us in times of uncertainty, then who or what do we turn to in terms of psychical support?

Adaptive choices seem to have the effect of telling participants that they are the ones who need to accept more responsibility for leadership, to accept the burden of being a figure of narcissistic investment (Cluley, 2008; Gabriel, 1997), a phenomenon which is amplified through a focus on collaborative forms of leadership. Yet paradoxically and simultaneously a focus on collaborative leadership seems to undermine this very figure of narcissism, the strong individual leader (Costas and Taheri, 2012; Grint, 2010; Stavrakakis, 2008). Such a dilemma suggests that facilitators may need to become more adept in supporting the psychical resilience and emerging identifications of individual middle managers. We are not suggesting here that one must be a professional analyst to facilitate leadership development, nor that one ought to view development as an exercise in psychoanalysing participants. Nevertheless, it is worth bearing in mind that facilitation choices are

not simply discursive ones, but choices which intervene in the affective, emotional side of organisations (Gabriel, 1995). Planning to support participants to become figures of leadership authority, as well as the construction of an alternative system of support and authority become important considerations.

As a final point, beyond considerations of framing and adaptive facilitator choices is the sense that these choices overspill the confines of a development intervention and thus also the role of the facilitator. Such choices are also matters for organisations and governments when planning leadership development initiatives. The idea that facilitators and programme participants should enter leadership development interventions cold, and that participants should exit leadership development programmes into organisations not prepared themselves to grapple with leadership development facilitation choices seems to us a flawed state of affairs. Key to this paper, after all, is the argument that problems encountered as relatively minor issues within the confines of a leadership development programme may in fact indicate larger organisational and social problems requiring more systemic engagement and debate. The crossroads are ever present.



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