



The meaning of leadership in the civil service : an hermeneutic study

COUCH, Oliver

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Sheffield Hallam University
Learning and IT Services
Adsetts Centre City Campus
Sheffield S1 1WB

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Sheffield S1 1WB

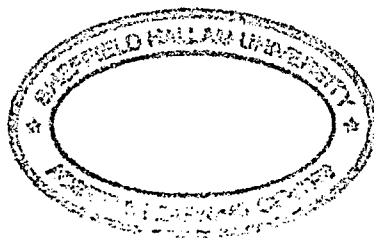
REFERENCE

The Meaning of Leadership in the Civil Service – an Hermeneutic Study

Oliver Couch

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
of Sheffield Hallam University
for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration**

September 2007



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Abstract

There has been much written about leadership; so much in fact that it tends to cloud rather than illuminate the issue. But little of that work has been about how leadership is understood by professionals in their workplace and the impact that has on their day-to-day activities. This research covers the period from early 2002 until the end of 2004, and includes fieldwork in the Department of Education and Skills (as it was known until June 2007). The research was conducted in a traditional hermeneutic style from a critical perspective, and the evidence is taken from interviews with twelve senior civil servants. There were three aspects of leadership that came to the fore in the research. First, leadership in the civil service cannot be satisfactorily described by existing models in the academic literature. For these civil servants, leadership is made up of four elements, vision, motivation, monitoring progress and reaching planned outcomes, which itself could lead back to renewed vision. Thus there was a cycle from conception to results. This thesis proposes a new model of leadership that describes this cycle, called the Leadership Circle. Second, training in leadership is problematic (some trainees think it very valuable; others see little or no worth in it) and discussion on it throws up some unexpected related issues such as isolation in the workplace and lack of confidence amongst leaders. The way training in leadership is set in the wider context of support for leaders needs to be re-considered by HR departments; there is a wide range of benefits that can accrue if leadership training is seen as part of a suite of continuing support. Finally, civil servants' scope to act as leaders is constrained by the parallel role filled by Government Ministers. Theoretically there is a clear division of responsibility and authority between the two groups but there are overlaps in the day-to-day situation. And the roles of each group have changed significantly over the last 30 years without any overt acknowledgement of that change or consideration of the consequences. Is either group well placed to deliver their evolved roles? It is suggested that this situation is serious enough to merit further work.

Declaration:

This thesis is all my own work, and has not been submitted for any other academic award.

Oliver Couch

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CHAPTER 1

WHY RESEARCH INTO LEADERSHIP?

Introduction

This chapter sets out why I chose the issue of leadership to research, my thoughts on leadership at that time, and thus the mind set that I had when I started. We will see in Chapter 2 that I have chosen to follow a critical theory and hermeneutic path which means that I need to set out my own feelings about the research subject matter for you to see. This is important in hermeneutic research because the role of the researcher is not regarded as wholly objective and the pre-understanding they bring to the work is relevant in discussing conclusions drawn. The reader is entitled to be able to put themselves, at least in part, in the researcher's shoes. Hermeneutic research attempts to get beneath the words used by people to reach a better understanding of the underlying meaning of the words; for example to put to one side the generalities and assumptions, the "taken for granted", so as to obtain a richer and long lasting understanding. Additionally, reflexivity, including self-reflexivity, is important since the researcher's own judgement and intuition form a part of the research process. That means that the data being discussed is considered by the researcher in a subjective way, even though the attempt is to let the data speak for themselves. It is crucial to recognise that this process is not pure – one cannot deduct the subjectivity from the work and leave only objective findings. The aim is to prepare the reader as fairly as possible, so they can judge for themselves the validity of the conclusions drawn.

Chapter 2 will deal with critical theory, hermeneutics and reflexivity more thoroughly, but for now it is important to see that no attempt will be made to

distance the researcher absolutely from the subject of the thesis, and that the best way to take account of the researcher's subjectivity, so far as that is possible, is to recognise it. This chapter is intended to help the reader take that step.

The chapter ends with an overview of the thesis as a whole, with the intention of giving the reader a map of the journey before we start – something, as we will see, that many regard as an aspect of successful leadership!

The research

This research wasn't commissioned so why have I done it? In short, the issue of what is leadership, and what impact does it have for people, has interested me for a long time, and when I started on my DBA an opportunity to do something about it arose. I realised that I could find out more for myself, and make a contribution to academic and professional knowledge and practice. I wanted to establish at least some of what leadership meant – to move it from being a rather vague concept to a more precise understanding in a particular context that could make a practical benefit to people in professional life.

In writing this chapter I've tried to go back five or six years, to the start of my DBA journey. Ideally I should have written it before I started, or as I was going along, but that didn't happen. It is important to do my best to reflect on where I was all that time ago because my understanding of my research subject then must have influenced my thinking and my approach to, and conduct of, the research. So this brief chapter is an honest attempt to recreate that time. As we will see, I am happy to admit to the influence of subjectivity in research so I don't pretend that this chapter is any more than a look back at where I think I was, knowing what I know now. This is important because research is always coloured by the researcher's pre-understanding, whether naïve or sophisticated, and in this case the pre-understanding must not only be admitted but should also be laid out. It is, in a very real sense, part of the research journey.

I started my DBA soon after completing my MBA, in which I researched into partnerships, looking specifically at how organisations worked together effectively to deliver Government priorities in the East Midlands. One thing became clear in that work. The role of institutional leaders was a key factor in productive partnerships. Other factors needed to be in place to ensure productive outcomes (for example agreed roles and responsibilities), but in the end, if individuals from partnership organisations couldn't work well together, often on a personal basis, then the partnership's effectiveness would be sub-optimal. I thought then, without having researched leadership at all, that such individuals were more often than not leading their organisations in the partnership, and thus individually or collectively leading the partnership, rather than merely representing their organisations. In one particular case, a leader of one organisation was moved from a successful partnership to one that wasn't doing well, and in six months the performance of both partnerships changed dramatically. Success moved with the individual; it looked as if the organisational leader, in that case at least, was a crucial factor in the success of the partnership.

At the beginning I had three principle areas of interest, leadership as a practical concern, leadership and management, and training to become a leader. All these stemmed from what I had seen on the ground amongst what I perceived as successful leaders in Government partnerships. I wanted to see whether, and if so how, these perceptions played out in professional life.

Leadership as a practical concern

I was interested in a combination of overlapping ideas about how Government policy gets delivered, partnerships, strategy, delivery chains and leadership. Several questions arose. If leadership really was so important, what exactly was it and how did it come to exert its influence? Was leadership the same thing to

different people in different circumstances? How do people make sense of leadership in their everyday lives?

In the end it was this last question that interested me most because it brings the big questions (such as 'what is leadership') down to a practical level. If it is true that, in the civil service, leadership in some form is exercised by most people every day, then for civil servants, leadership ought to be a very important part of life. (It is certainly arguable that leadership is exercised only by the most senior echelons in a bureaucracy, but it has long been a tenet of civil service culture that leadership is exercised to some extent by almost everyone, as we will see in Chapters 3 and 4.)

My first step was to go back to some of the big questions, so I could take an overview of the broader picture. This was important to enable me to contextualise my research in an academic framework, and see whether I could make a contribution to organisational leadership theory as a whole, as well as contributions to theory based in the public service, and to professional practice.

In that wider context, leadership is a concept that occurs regularly, at work, in sports and, of course, in politics (which, as we'll see in Chapter 6, is a particular concern in the civil service). As a subject for business and organisational studies it has spawned a considerable literature, which we'll see in Chapter 3 leaves quite a lot unclear. But for me leadership is not just an academic concept over which authors can debate meaning; for many people leadership plays an important role, affecting pay, career development and the direction of their working lives. And in the public sector the introduction of what is referred to as the new public management in the 1980s has led to fundamental change in the way leaders may be expected to operate (Ferlie et al (1996)). Not only does new public management suggest efficiency, rationality, and a linear approach but McAuley et al say that efficiency "... also involves separation between those who think and act strategically in the organisation and those who implement those strategies"

(2007:88). That implies a distinction between two groups of workers but, as I said earlier, the civil service culture is that almost everyone acts as a leader from time to time. It should not be left only to academics to decide what constitutes leadership but the voice of those directly affected must be heard as well. Chapter 2 will show how this led me to decide to follow a critical theory approach to the research.

The typical working arrangement within which leadership is operated in the civil service is that of a team with a team leader; teams come together to make Divisions, led by a Divisional Manager; Divisions report to a Director; Directors to Directors-General; and the whole is headed by the Permanent Secretary and the Board. This is a very common way of organising work and despite bouts of down-sizing and de-layering, it remains robust. In the public sector, at the top, there is the added complexity of Government Ministers providing political direction. They take medium term strategic decisions and they also make key day-to-day decisions. As for staff, everyone has a line manager and apart from the most junior, everyone line manages staff (and hence, in civil service culture, is in some way a leader).

So how does this translate into leadership in the civil service, and how do those practising leadership understand the concept? In practical terms, what is leadership? That is the key research question.

Leadership and management

In casual discussion people will sometimes refer to leaders and managers in terms of different people (ie. George is a leader; Tony is a manager), or the same people in different roles (George can act as a leader or a manager depending on the circumstances), or interchangeably (if I draw no distinction between the roles; what George does could be described either as managing or leading). Is this an issue that makes a difference in the workplace? At first sight, the distinction

between leadership and management should be either clear and distinct or unclear and immaterial. As we'll see in Chapter 4 the distinction is real enough for some, but the literature is split. Some writers see an obvious distinction, some none at all, some say it depends on context, others say it is a dilemma (Zaleznick 1997, Burnes 1996, Kotter 1990, and Rickards and Clark 2006, for example cover each of these positions although this will be discussed further in Chapter 4). My own starting point is that it is straightforward to imagine a situation in which a good leader is not a good manager. Martin Luther King was a very effective leader (although quite how much he himself achieved for the emancipation of blacks is arguable. As Young puts it, blacks "... are still waiting for America to honour ..." the cheque "... that will give [them] the riches of freedom" (Young 2007: 6)) but whether he could manage, say an action plan to get the cheque honoured is unclear.

Why then is there so much debate about leadership and management? Is this an issue at all, and if so, is it problematic? Or is it a distinction without meaning in the workplace? If that is so, why do we still use both terms?

Training to become a leader

In the civil service training is taken seriously. In addition to specific vocational training, in how to use computer software packages for example, training is available in areas such as leading and managing, influencing and negotiating; and there is growing interest in training in coaching and mentoring skills. So can anyone be trained to be a leader, is it possible for everyone to succeed in becoming a leader, or are there some innate qualities or characteristics that one can't do without?

In the sense of training someone to be an effective line manager, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the civil service is doing well in ensuring that we all have the right skills. No-one is allowed to complete an annual appraisal on a colleague

without training, which is refreshed regularly. And from time to time specific training in, for example, equal opportunities, is provided if it seems, as it often does, that ethnic minorities get a rough deal at annual appraisal time.

But line management is a long way from leadership, isn't it? As it happens the Department introduced a Leadership and Management Programme shortly before this research started so the timing of this research was perfect in being able to ask people about their experience of leadership training and assessing the extent to which it made sense to them. Chapter 5 explores this territory.

The key issue – the contribution to knowledge and professional practice

But, of course, it is what the data says that is important. The underlying issue here is what does the term 'leadership' mean to civil servants, who are expected to demonstrate leadership on a day-to-day basis. Having established that – to whatever extent proves possible – what can we draw from that knowledge that will improve professional practice, and what can we say about it in terms of leadership theory in organisations of all kinds. This is developed more fully in Chapter 2.

The structure of this thesis

This thesis is about how people make sense of leadership. Chapter 2 discusses the essential philosophical and practical underpinning for the thesis as a whole. This was both an enormous learning curve for me personally and one of the most interesting areas to explore. Having decided to research into leadership I first worked backwards and outwards to think broadly about ontology and epistemology (words new to me then) and then forwards and inwards to focus on methods. I knew that questionnaires wouldn't do for me as a research method but I didn't know why. I do now.

One major point for me, and one that has influenced that chapter, is my unease about labelling myself as being in one box, theoretically, rather than another. So, although for the purposes of this work I find myself a critical theorist using an hermeneutic approach, and I am very comfortable with that, I do include a discussion to explore aspects of postmodernism which are intended to provoke in the reader some questions about the data under examination. This is not just an indulgence on my part. Hassard (1991) once viewed an issue from different theoretical standpoints and found that not only did he achieve different results, but the order in which he adopted different positions affected his results. Thus, I think we should be open to alternative analyses.

In Chapter 3, I discuss some established literature on the subject – it is not a comprehensive literature review in the classical sense but an overview of some writers' thoughts – then compare that with relevant corporate literature, and discuss the hunches that come from that process. The hunches are very important; they form the basis for the interviews, to be confirmed or rejected in the interviews, then supported or not by additional literature review, and thus, if passing these tests, providing the foundations for my conclusions. So my hunches are the ones to be tested. As we'll see, they will be modified by experience, but they are mighty important and will be influenced by my learning, and pre-understanding.

In Chapters 4, 5 and 6 I discuss the research data and begin to draw conclusions. The discussion is separated into the three main areas of leadership as a skill, training in leadership and civil service leadership and Government Ministers. You will see that my three original areas of interest have been modified by the research data but my original ideas are still very much there. But the chapters follow the data rather than my prejudices.

My conclusions, and my personal reflections on the research and what might be done to take the work on, are in Chapter 7.

Name of the Department

In June 2007, as this thesis reached its final draft stage, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), where all my interviews were based, was split and merged with parts of other Departments, to form a new department of state. I use the name DfES here as being appropriate to the history of the research.

CHAPTER 2

HOW THE RESEARCH WAS CARRIED OUT

Introduction

This chapter covers a number of important issues sometimes handled separately. Since, however, each influences the others I have chosen to discuss them together because that better describes how I made progress in the research. The issues covered are the research question, my contribution to knowledge, the context of leadership in the Department, ontology, epistemology, methodology and method. Headings will guide the reader.

Summary

I decided to conduct this research into leadership in the civil service in a hermeneutic manner from a critical standpoint. This is appropriate because I didn't anticipate discovering positivistic truths about leadership but wanted to gain a better understanding about how senior civil servants understood, and made sense of, the concept in their everyday lives. Additionally, the civil service is an established hierarchical structure with power relationships between staffing grades and between staff and the organisation (for example in the Department's use of leadership in terms of reward and promotion) in which 'leadership' is part of the dominant discourse but not distinctly defined and this approach facilitates a discussion on that point. Finally, my subjectivity, and that of the interviewees, is a crucial element to recognise in evaluating the data and reaching conclusions, and that rules out some of the methodological options.

This had a number of benefits. Those being interviewed did more than just contribute data; they shaped the direction of the research both directly (by confirming or rejecting my hunches or suggesting new ones) and indirectly (by focussing their replies on particular aspects of the areas under discussion), and thus underlining their own interpretation of leadership and indicating which aspects of leadership were important to them.

However, it is necessary to consider data collected in this manner as highly coloured by the social constructs of the individuals concerned and by the interviewer's own subjectivity. So, conclusions arising from this approach must be treated as one, only, of many possible views, but they carry the authority of the weight of the interviewees and researcher and, if supported across the research data, conclusions can be regarded as reliable enough to warrant serious consideration as influencers of change in the work place.

The research question

This thesis looks at how civil servants in the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) make sense of the Department's use of the term 'leadership'. 'Leadership' is a specific issue, both in terms of the overall vision for the civil service as a whole set by the Cabinet Secretary, and right through to day-to-day performance management in the DfES. The interpretation of the Department's leadership discourse has a direct effect not only on policies that affect the general public, and on value for money for the tax-payer, but also on individual members of staff's promotion chances and performance assessments (which links to pay); and each individual's own subjective interpretation affects the working lives of their subordinates in the same way. As we will see in Chapter 3, this is not just restricted to an assessment of 'leadership' as a single competency, but it affects all competencies used by the Department for recruitment, selection, promotion and performance assessment.

In turn, this affects how the Department works internally and with others, how it sets strategy and plans actions, and the effectiveness and efficiency with which it delivers what Ministers, and the public, wants.

It could hardly be more important, therefore, to know how the term is understood and used, and whether there is a common understanding, or a variety of differing interpretations. On the face of it, a single interpretation would maximise the effectiveness of that one approach to leadership, for good or ill, but might put at risk innovation, creativity, flexibility and diversity; but multiple interpretations risk confusion, waste, poor use of resources and lack of delivery of objectives. The research, therefore, will seek to answer the question, 'how do senior DfES staff understand leadership in their work context, and how does this affect the way they work?'

Contribution to knowledge

There is no published research dealing with this particular question, although studies by the Cabinet Office (PIU 2000) and internal DfES training and development programmes attempt to describe and suggest ways of 'improving' or 'strengthening' leadership in the civil service. Neither is there any discussion of how civil servants interpret and then apply the concept of leadership. This research begins to fill the gap directly and compares leadership in the civil service with existing theories of leadership in the academic literature. It focuses on (a) what does leadership in the civil service mean, (b) the implications of this for leadership training and (c) how do civil servants and Ministers exercise leadership when they work together. Additionally, comparisons are drawn between leadership in the changing civil service and in changing organisations more generally. Finally, but not least, the research draws some conclusions about professional practice in the civil service and how that can be developed.

Leadership in the Department

Before I can discuss philosophical and methodological choices it is necessary to understand the nature and context of leadership in the Department. This section outlines the position. A fuller description of leadership in the Department and a discussion on how it compares with theories in literature can be found in Chapter 3.

There are many references to leadership in the DfES and the civil service generally which might help us identify what the term means corporately in those organisations, or at least how it is applied or measured. The DfES "Competency Guide" (DfES 2001) sets out five competencies for staff which "... describe how we should do our job and how we should achieve our outputs rather than what the tasks or outputs themselves actually are. They are a set of working behaviours ...". For the first time, the Department has set general competencies for staff, rather than different competencies for different grades. The fifth of the five competencies is called Leading and Managing Others, and it is worth setting out the definition given:

"you get the best out of people by giving clear direction, offering support and encouragement, treating everyone fairly and valuing diversity" (DfES 2001).

The Department is clear we are dealing here with behaviours rather than personality, that leadership is about vision, direction and support, and that there is a moral or ethical dimension. It also clear that leadership is about what the leader does to help others achieve outcomes as well as achieving goals themselves.

This guide was to be replaced in April 2006 by a cross-Whitehall initiative called Professional Skills for Government, which applied to all grades and above in every Government Department. The new approach retains leadership as a core

competency around which other skills are placed, and defines in terms of results (impact, improvement and engaging stakeholders), directions (vision, seizing opportunity and decision making), capability (innovation, getting the best from everyone, and growing from experience) and integrity (self awareness, confidence and team working) (DfES 2007).

The DfES competency guide is not the only textual source from which we can understand better what is meant by the term leadership in the civil service. In autumn 1999, the permanent heads of the main civil service departments met under the chairmanship of the Sir Richard Wilson, the then head of the civil service, to discuss civil service reform. Their report was sent to the Prime Minister, and published on 15 December 1999 (and can be found on the Cabinet Office website, www.cabinet-office.gov.uk). The report focused on six key themes of which the first was leadership, now expanded into the phrase "stronger leadership with a clear sense of purpose". Wilson went on "... all studies of successful organisations show that strong leadership is essential to achieve change. We need leaders at all levels, but particularly at the top, who are actively committed to transforming their organisations, have a clear sense of direction, purpose and values, and inspire and motivate those they work with ..." (Wilson 1999:2). His description of what this meant included the introduction of a civil service-wide vision and values; the definition of leadership qualities and competencies and the use of these in recruitment, training and promotion; self-awareness as a key criterion for good leadership; and corporate leadership for the civil service as a whole. There is little here to show that Wilson and the other permanent secretaries had in mind a truly radical change despite the rhetoric. Certainly nothing then has happened since indicates a revolution in terms of leadership as a civil service competency. But the clarity of the message was new and the primacy of 'leadership' unexpected but, I think welcome. It gave people a firm grip on what the most senior Civil Servants meant in terms that could be easily applied to any post.

In the DfES, Sir Michael Bichard, then Permanent Secretary, said leadership would "...feature more strongly ... in recruitment and promotion". In a speech to staff he said "teams produce better solutions more often than individuals. But effective teams require people to be flexible and they need leaders who provide a sense of purpose and direction without seeking always to impose their will" (Bichard 1999). That suggests that leadership is about purpose, change, direction, and values and about motivating sub-ordinates. Bichard's contribution brings in teams, flexibility and the notion that the leader should not always lead.

A third source is the government report "Strengthening Leadership" (PIU 2000). It is a report written by a small group of high flyer civil servants and external consultants on what leadership is or should be, not about how civil servants or others understand, and make sense of, the concept of leadership.

There can be little question, therefore, that leadership, whatever is meant by that, is of central importance to the civil service in general and the DfES in particular. Whatever effect it has, it has a direct bearing on delivering the Government's agenda, and the working lives of civil servants in DfES. It is relevant and useful, therefore, to conduct research into how those who are meant to lead, or in this case a particular sub-set of that group, Senior Civil Servants, understand what is meant by 'leadership' and how their interpretation of the term colours their own and their staffs' working lives.

Overall approach to the research process

There is a danger of pretending that this research followed a neat course from A to Z that can be conveniently labelled in simple academic terms. The introduction to this chapter might give the reader the impression that I settled at once into a clear epistemological and methodological pattern that was plainly the most appropriate for this research. I didn't. In hours and hours of lectures, seminars, learning group discussions, and years of reading, two things became apparent. First,

despite many people attempting to clarify matters by boxing up ideas and giving the boxes labels, the boxes leaked badly and the labels were unreliable; one person's box labelled "realism" may not be the same as another person's with the same label (Johnson and Duberley 2000:148). Second, by attaching even the most reliable labels to a box, one is attaching not a simple and agreed philosophical and practical definition of approach but instead is attaching a confused and confusing set of ideas and values which are then coloured by the reader's (and thus from the author's point of view, unknown) set of values and presumptions.

For example, if I said this was a positivist or, with less certainty of agreeing with the reader about definitions, a postmodern thesis, then it would be the reader's subjective interpretation of those terms that coloured their understanding of my, subjective, research. One can of course assume a certain level of agreement about terms, but an assumption is only that: it doesn't confer absolute agreement and understanding. On top of that, even the terms I do use with some confidence do not map exactly from textbook to my world. So if, for example, I use the term 'critical theory' then I do not expect my interpretation of it to coincide absolutely with any single other interpretation. That is a general statement of my feelings about epistemological labels. There is no absolute certainty about terms because of inevitable subjective bias; but there is enough that is agreed to assume a sufficiently objective ontology to enable us to make progress on that basis. I would rather, therefore, avoid labels: but accept that some are useful, or even necessary, in order to go forwards.

Let me give you some examples of both confusion and of sufficient agreement from the literature. It is not uncommon to find that the moment one writer has set out a definition of, or described how to use, an approach, someone else will to some extent disagree; that after all is the basis on which peer review works so it is part of the academic world to do so. In some cases (eg the discussion on hermeneutics and Madison in Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000:59 et seq), writers

admit this confusion, cite alternative explanations, say that the others they cite have got it wrong and then imply that they do not know themselves what they are doing! Part of this may be due to the comparative youth of management research which means that there has not yet been time to hammer out an agreed language strong enough to become the dominant discourse, although hermeneutics is hardly a new approach. But there is no agreed-by-all narrative on epistemology and methodology, no single source of definitions of alternative approaches, despite the common currency of the terms employed. Goulding (1999:862) makes the point that not only is there "... a quagmire of contradictions and conflicting methodologies ...", but that "... simply identifying and selecting the one that is right both [for the] researcher and the problem at hand is challenge enough ..." without worrying too much about the quagmire itself.

So, as Goulding suggests (1999:861), fidelity to the phenomena under study seems at least as important a driver in choosing a methodology, whatever the underpinning philosophical arguments. And I would add that a DBA thesis, with its dual aims of being both academic and practical, must give as much attention to the latter as the former. It would be possible to compartmentalise the thesis so that the practical elements can be separated from the academic and for some that might be a pragmatic thing to do. But the richness of the added understanding that the ontological and epistemological debate gives to the discussion on the practical research data should not be lightly thrown away. I would rather persuade practitioners of the value of the academic underpinning, than spend a lot of time attempting to evidence it from the workplace.

In what follows, therefore, I will use others' terms and definitions as accurately as I can, knowing that the readers' understanding may differ from my own. Some things are relatively clear (this research was conducted from a hermeneutic approach, and used interview methods), but even in saying that I realise that the reader will have their own ideas about those terms and will have preconceptions

that colour their view of what I am saying. I do not ask the reader to jettison their preconceptions but to recognise theirs and to allow for mine.

Crotty (1998) suggests that a researcher's process has four elements, epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and method, which are necessary to deal with the questions about the methods to be used in the research and the justification of them. Crotty variously starts with the first or the last in his list, and works forwards or backwards, so he clearly does not think it matters which end one starts from and nor do I. What is important is that the overall package hangs together properly and that the package is recognised by the reader as a valid and robust basis from which to collect and evaluate research data and draw conclusions.

Ontology - theoretical perspective

At a day-to-day level, for the vast majority of mankind, ontology is not something to worry about. It matters not that philosophers have been wrestling with profound questions about what constitutes 'truth' and how this impacts on daily life. People generally do not care whether there are broadly three main schools of thought or hundreds. For most people, common sense and learning, in the widest sense, will get them through. They are not aware that epistemology and ontology can be used to analyse and bring some understanding to their worlds. They do not use these terms. For most people, most of the time, 'truth' is common sense.

This is not a casual matter. Lewis Wolpert, a biologist, suggests a lack of interest in the subject may not matter much at all. The point is not that we know the right answer to something, but that we have an answer that satisfies us. He says that all cultures believe in ideas for which there is no real evidence, and that people have a fundamental need to make sense of their lives, that "we hate uncertainty, and that for major life events find it intolerable". He goes on to suggest that this "... may be part of our genetic make-up because [such beliefs] are adaptive"

(Wolpert 1997). For the layman, belief in the truth of the Big Bang, or DNA, is out of reach (but not impossibly so since with a great deal of study he could understand the evidence); and for some the random chance that is part of Darwin's theory of evolution is unacceptable. Wolpert suggests that the need to provide explanations for events drove mankind to thinking about making connections, which in turn was essential for the development of tool making and modern man. So for most people making a connection so that we have an answer to fundamental questions is more important than having the unequivocally right answer.

But for those who research, this is not enough. In order to frame their work and allow their peers to consider its worth, and then to have it accepted as a contribution to knowledge, it is necessary to have a formal epistemology to justify their methods and results. And anyone conducting or using research needs to understand the epistemological and ontological basis behind it in order to understand the claims that are being made, and to assess their worth.

I have divided the main ontological stances into three groups and will start by explaining why the third of them, critical theory, is appropriate for this study.

Positivism

Positivism is "... the dominant philosophical stance in a great deal of organization theory ..." (McAuley et al 2007:33), and thus if a researcher intends not to adopt that stance it is necessary to explain why. The central core of positivism is a belief that the world exists in an objective sense and that one can interact with it objectively and neutrally. That is, one can gather empirical data without interfering with the matter under investigation. This allows the establishment of theories that can be proved or disproved. Once proved, they are 'true'.

This works fine in some cases. To take a simple example, it works well at the level of boiling water. If you boil water at sea level a thermometer will register 100 degrees Celsius. This can be replicated as often as one wishes. If you go up a mountain to repeat the experiment, and put a lid on the water vessel, the experiment will yield a different result, but these different results are again easy to replicate. We have simple positivistic truths which works well in everyday life. But that isn't the whole story.

The history of philosophy is littered with examples of individuals who have found fault with the proofs of their predecessors, and have supplied proofs of new truths of their own. This is not a new truth building on old, it is a rejection of the old. On the subject of immortality and the existence of God, St Thomas rejected Anselm's proofs, and Kant rejected Descartes'; and quantum physics unravelled many of the former certainties of classical physics. Sometimes new proofs completely overturn old ideas (for example Keppler on the earth moving round the sun).

So one objection to positivism is that even 'true' theories are by no means immune to attack and eventual disproof, so one can legitimately ask why a present truth should be privileged and accepted as right. Another objection is that the concept of neutral observation has come under assault.

Physicists working in the field of quantum mechanics have undermined the concept of neutral observation. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle is often cited as the measure that puts the issue beyond doubt (although Ball 2003: 118 would disagree). But there is a much more exciting example that shows not only that the observer can influence reality by setting out to measure one factor rather than another, but they can influence reality whilst an experiment is taking place. Thus they are in the experiment not merely observing it.

For a full explanation see Gribben (1984:163 et seq), but in short, the experiment appears to demonstrate that electrons 'know' when they are being watched. The apparatus is simplicity itself, an electron gun firing at a screen. Between the gun and the screen there is barrier with two holes that can be open or closed. If only one hole is open, the electrons pass through it and on the screen they are seen as a pile concentrated immediately behind that hole. If both holes are open, the electrons are seen as a single pile, spread out more widely than before, with its peak mid-way between the two holes. Thus with one hole open the electrons behave as particles; with both open they behave as a wave. If one hole is left open, and the other is open and closed at different times, the screen will see the electrons behaving as particles or a wave as appropriate.

However, it is possible to detect which hole the electron passes through. If one looks, each electron is at one hole only, never both, even if both are open; and if observed, the electrons always behave as particles, never as a wave. In some sense, therefore, the electron 'knows' when it is being observed. When observed, the wave function collapses into a particle; when unobserved, the electron keeps its options open. The observer is thus part of the experiment. Although this is a rather specialist example it throws into doubt the neutral observation requirement of positivism.

And this can be linked to social research. A passionate proponent of positivism in organisational research, Lex Donaldson, uses another example from atomic physics to support the use of a positive ontology. He says the use of bubble chambers to plot the path of particles too small to be directly observed demonstrates how it is possible to "...validate or falsify a theory without empirically studying all of its processes, some of which may remain inaccessible..." (Donaldson 2005). This allows him to apply a strictly positivistic approach to social science research whilst not in fact collecting empirical data but by drawing conclusions by proxy. Oddly, Donaldson says "... my main concern was to defend these theories and methods [based on functionalism, positivism, contingency theory and quantitative,

comparative research methods] from dismissal by arguing that they had a validity ...” (Donaldson 2005). This sounds suspiciously like having your cake and eating it: applying a positivistic line whilst picking and choosing which ‘rules of evidence’ to apply.

Donaldson used the phrase ‘validate or falsify’ which brings in an important modification to positivism introduced by Popper, who suggested that the concept of ‘verifying’ a theory, something that was part of the central core of positivism, was the wrong approach. He said that this was a mistaken approach because a single observation might undermine a truth (the popular example is that a single sighting of a black swan undermines the truth that all swans are white no matter how many observation of white swans had been made). Thus verifying a truth is logically impossible; but, Popper said, theories can be falsifiable. In addition to this being a sounder logical position it also makes it easier for truths to be modified to account for new observations rather than discarded when verification failed (see Magee 1985: 22 et seq).

However, whilst Popper dealt in part with the problem of induction (that no matter how many confirming observations are made, there can never be certainty that what is regarded as true is really true) by shifting the logical basis, the problems associated with neutral observation remain.

There is no denying that positivistic research has a place and that it is widely regarded as not only sound, but, for some, it is the only ontology to use. It is also “... pivotal to management ...” (McAuley et al 2007) since it provides ‘truths’ that can be used to control and the authority to do the controlling. But, for me, the notion of being able to interact neutrally with interviewees talking about their subjective understanding of leadership is untenable. In a later section in this chapter I discuss the active role of the interviewee and the desirability of interplay between interviewer and interviewee, and the importance of getting behind the prime facie data to explore the understandings of the interviewee. I’m sure a case

for a positivistic approach to this could be made, but for me the possibility of collecting neutral and objective empirical data is a non-starter.

Postmodernism

At the other end of the ontological scale is postmodernism. It would be helpful to be able to start a discussion on postmodernism by defining it; as Rosenau (1992) says "... if ...controversy lies ahead, then clarity about basis and implications can facilitate constructive dialogue" (1992:3). But even a passing acquaintance with the literature shows things to be much too complex to allow a simple definition. For example, writers cannot agree on the spelling of the word "postmodernism" let alone its meaning; there is some reluctance to define the term at all; and two different meanings (epochal and epistemological) get confused (see Hassard (1992), Kilduff and Mehra (1997) and McAuley et al (2007), for example).

The key is that in postmodernism, both epistemology and ontology are subjective (in positivism, both were objective), and language is the only expression of reality.

Postmodernists insist that language is the expression of reality and that we forget that language is arbitrary and continually changing. The relationship between a concept, and the words used to describe it, is arbitrary. If words can only be defined by other words; there can be no absolute foundations. More than that, the meanings are continually changing. Parker (1995) takes this on the next step when he says, "if ... there are no stable foundations ... there is no guarantee of the certainty of anything at all". Thus any prevailing narrative or discourse on any subject that is experienced as fact is inherently unreliable; and, more dangerously, in experiencing it as fact that discourse drives out alternative discourses (see Calas and Smircich (1997) for an example on leadership).

This leads to questions about multiple truths (which 'truth' is being voiced?), dominant discourses (which are being suppressed?), and the effects of all this

(how do we see ourselves and others)? The postmodernist mission is to unsettle established discourses and undermine traditions and orthodoxies, and to carve out new domains of intelligibility by giving voice to 'truths' which were previously suppressed (see Gergen (1992) and Rosenau (1982) for example). This is accomplished through three techniques, deconstruction, genealogy, and truth-effects.

Deconstruction unpeels the onionskins of discourses, to reveal the contradictions, assumptions and layers of meaning therein. The idea is not directly to undermine the discourse itself, but to undermine any notion of certainty that the discourse represents the best or only interpretation, and to promote discussion and consideration of the alternatives. Key questions include, why have the alternatives been excluded; and is this an issue about power rather than worth?

Genealogy establishes what the dominant discourses are, and how they enable and limit what is knowable. The task is to examine the socio-historical conditions that make that discourse possible and how it came to be dominant. And to go beyond the emergence of discourses to examine how they are adapted and transformed into new discourses. Barry and Elmes (1997) argue that effective narratives (ie discourses) need to be credible and novel simultaneously and that there are a number of devices open to authors to achieve this (materiality, voice and perspective, ordering and plot, and readership). For example the casual use of the familiar models (for example SWOT, and PEST) or the liberal use of (subjectively chosen) references from established writers, can be used to give authority and weight to a piece of writing, and to guide the reader to interpret the discourse in the 'right' way. If it is true that "where print is cheap and knowledge is rapidly changing, singular readings of strategic narratives, where model readers arrive at like interpretations, will be increasingly a thing of the past" (Barry and Elmes 1997: 440), then the world is arguably becoming more postmodern as alternative discourses are heard.

The third of the three routes to deliver the postmodern mission is truth-effects. For postmodernists, knowledge and power are the same thing, and they are delivered through dominant discourses. These discourses produce what is seen to be a reality that suppresses the articulation of alternative possible 'truth-effects'. Postmodernists say that knowledge (and thus power) resides in the discourses themselves and not in individuals. Although there are always multiple discourses, and discourses can confront one another, often there is a particularly strong discourse that becomes imprinted (or 'inscribed') on people. This truth-effect shapes how people think and behave and structures their experiences and definitions of themselves. The result is that people are not free to make their own interpretations, being constrained by the dominant discourse. Postmodernists try to bring in new discourses by deconstructing the existing discourses.

There are clearly questions here that are relevant to my research whatever the underlying ontology. For example, we have seen how the leadership discourse has been handed down in the civil service; what discourses has that dislodged or suppressed? Has the leadership discourse become imprinted, or inscribed?

Postmodernists reject the grand narrative that suggests managers or anyone else can gain some form of superior knowledge, for example through training. They want to disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions that form part of the dominant discourse. There is no such thing, they say, as neutral management practices, but that dominant discourses exercise power to define and constrain our identities. Postmodernists encourage reflexivity, but in order to do that productively people must be aware of the excluded as well as the included. No one image of reality is superior to another – all are equally valid.

Johnson (2000) suggests this leads to a dilemma. Are postmodernists in danger of "conservative disinterestedness supportive of the status quo [lurking] behind a radical posturing" or are they "rebels without a cause"? Must they, he suggests, deconstruct ad infinitum because to fail to do so means they fail to acknowledge

the lack of an authoritative position? And if postmodernists are to be faithful to relativism (ie. that since the context of everything is subjective, truths cannot be based on an objective foundation, and thus any claim for truths or privilege are relative to other such claims), they must they accept "that there can be no good reason for critique or any intervention beyond the unsettling"? Parker (1995) puts it differently "... a 'hard' postmodern epistemology is essentially a way of avoiding responsibility for the implications of organisational analysis". That is what is often called the sceptical interpretation of postmodernism (see McAuley et al 2007).

However, there is an alternative, more pragmatic, view. Kilduff and Mehra (1997) suggest that affirmative postmodernism "continues to bind researchers to rigorous standards of enquiry as they pursue radical interpretations." Rosenau (1992:169) argues that an affirmative postmodernism "would underscore novelty and reflexivity as it looked to the richness of difference and concentrates on the unusual, the singular, and the original". Kilduff and Mehra (1997) believe an argument can be made for a postmodern ontology that will make an authoritative contribution to the organizational research. I think there is scope in management research to test issues from a postmodernist standpoint to see if that increases understanding. One doesn't need to be a postmodernist to decide to use some of the postmodernist toolkit. As Kilduff and Mehra (1997) put it "... organizational studies might be reshaped by postmodernism in ways that enhance rather than detract from the research adventure". This argument is relevant to my research, not to establish postmodernism as the 'right' ontology, but to add an additional and valuable dimension to the analysis of data. As McAuley et al (2007:248) puts it "... postmodernism has posed significant challenges for organization theory". It is important to see where these challenges lead to a better understanding.

Critical theory

In one sense, critical theory has elements of positivism and postmodernism and brings them together into something that can seem a rather pessimistic view of

things. It shares with the former the notion of progress from the Age of the Enlightenment – albeit not in quite the same way – and the existence of an objective reality. It takes from the latter the idea that individuals have their own subjective understanding built up from internalised social and historical influences. But it is pessimistic in as much as the starting point is the need for people to escape the hegemony of organisational power before they can be considered to be free (it is optimistic in the sense that such freedom is attainable). There are strong echoes here of Marxism. Critical theory is based on a subjective realisation of an objective reality and this objectivisation of that realisation can be problematic. We'll see later that this dilemma recurs in what Habermas calls the ideal speech moment.

A key difference with positivism is that critical theorists do not believe it is possible to be a "... passive receiver of sensory data no matter what methodology we use ..." (McAuley et al 2007:38). Thus the neutral interaction with the subject being researched, a key point for positivism, is impossible.

Kant was a formative influence; in his Critique of Pure Reason (1781) he rejected the Cartesian dualism that is fundamental to positivism. He said people were stuck in the phenomenal world based on individual experience and could not access the noumenal world of external reality. Critical theorists say it is impossible therefore to engage neutrally with the objective world (see McAuley et al 2007:40).

These ideas were developed by the Frankfurt school and by Jurgan Habermas in particular. He rejected positivism's "objectivist illusions" which he said hide the influences that colour an individual's experience. He suggested there were two forms of knowledge, instrumental action and social action. He recognised positivism's contribution to the former, which focussed on environmental and non-social activity, saying that it had been very successful in allowing things to be done, but that did not of itself mean positivist theories were correct. In social action it was not possible to rely on the positivist's notion of causal relationship

since choice and understanding were essential ingredients, and that emphasised the role of interpersonal communication, and subjectivity. To these two ideas, Habermas added a third. He said it was necessary to seek to free people from domination and to liberate their rational capabilities. He called this 'emancipatory interest' from which he derives his critical science. His aim was to rid us of exploitation, domination and the distortion of communication so that critical theory would liberate people.

Critical theorists say that if individual interpretations of reality are distorted by subjectivity and by power, then people's decisions are not necessarily in their own best interests. How then can one discourse claim privilege over another? But if distorted communications can be replaced by rational consensus then progress will have been made. Such consensus is only possible if communications are entirely open and unconstrained. This is the ideal speech moment. However, there is doubt that all distortion can be removed - how would one know when that was achieved?

What we have here is a school of thought that appeals to notions of democracy and fairness, the reduction of exploitation, the identification of power as a potentially harmful influence and thus to notions of social inclusion and the celebration of diversity. No one has privileged knowledge as of right. Society has winners and losers, and critical theory can help to make society fairer.

But critical theory is about process not content. Content must come from consensus – there is no room here for the autocratic leader, however benign – no one set of ideas has automatic superiority over another. Democratic process must decide. But to work, it is essential to strive to reach the ideal speech moment and we have seen how problematic that is. So, for some, the difficulty of reaching an outcome that meets the severe test of critical theory leads them to another position, critical realism. For critical realists the situation is a little less theoretical. If truth for critical theorists is consensus, then for critical realists it is adequacy. If

by testing a theory through practice it proves good enough to settle practical problems, then a satisfactory situation is reached. There remain questions about for whom the theories are adequate, and over ethical and moral issues, for example why are the theories adequate, and for what purposes?

Critical realism demands a different arbitration, based on practical action arising from debate that does not automatically favour one discourse over others, but deliberately looks wider and "... examines the justifications of existing gazes, the relevance of their approaches to different audiences, and the sources and forms of support they receive" (Johnson and Duberley 2000:174). This appeals to me, although I think it too sweeping to say that this way of validating truth claims is significantly more rigorous than relativism in postmodernism. This is not a comparison one can reject solely on the grounds that postmodernists make no 'truth claim'; that there is nothingness. It might be argued by postmodernists that this lack of an absolute against which to validate truth claims is not only not surprising, but it is also not problematic. Enough is done by identifying and illuminating (or even generating) differences, dissensus and conflict (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000:121). To reject differences, dissensus and conflict as 'nothingness' is arbitrary in the extreme.

To sum up, I have reached a position where critical theory is my ontological framework for this research. This is not without some quite significant problems of which the ideal speech situation is the most graphic. But no other framework is better.

Epistemology – making sense of reality

The overall approach to this research is hermeneutics, "... with its focus on truth as an act of disclosure ...". This is Alvesson and Skoldberg's (2000:52) definition of alethic hermeneutics; they also refer to hermeneutics as a "minimal version of critical research" (p128). Foster (1994), after citing eight references, concludes, "...

any science of social life must ... be a hermeneutic one, which is concerned to make sense of 'objects' of study as 'text or text-analogue'. Such a science is based on an immersion in the data and reading of meanings. This process is invariably confused, cloudy, often contradictory and always incomplete" (Foster 1994:149–150). Given this broad sweep of a statement, it is perhaps not surprising that it is difficult to find a succinct definition of hermeneutics, and impossible to find one that fits all that has been written about it (this is yet more evidence to support my earlier comments about the problems of using labels). Indeed, some writers split the term up so as to accommodate different definitions (Alvesson and Skolberg (2000:52) into objectivist and alethic, and Crotty (1998:110) into mystic and reading/literary theory, in which he says the term is little more than a synonym for interpretation. There is a general agreement that, at its core, hermeneutics is about the notion of interacting with text so that lost meaning can be recovered, and through that, present understanding and accepted knowledge can be challenged. One can go further (as do Alvesson and Deetz 2000:142) and characterise the process as one that introduces conflict and choice, through which present actors are liberated from the dominant discourse that grew up in a past that has no present relevance. Others (eg McAuley 1985) do not make this a central point, however. This positions the hermeneutic researcher somewhere on a continuum between making on one hand an avuncular intervention to bring illumination to a particular topic, and on the other hand having a revolutionary mindset leading to the emancipation of workers from their existing oppression (echoes here of critical theory's pessimistic stance).

As I say, the extremes are avoidable. McAuley (1985) strikes a pragmatic balance, saying, "... what we would do is get data from [interviewees] ... and then get them to explore for themselves the implications of what they are saying ...". He goes on to say that "... what is crucial ... from a hermeneutic point of view, is the emphasis on drawing and shaping their data , and being able to confront our own commonsense assumptions as they confront theirs ...". McAuley himself describes this as "... the qualitative end of Action Research ...". This implies some form of

intervention to promote change, but that intervention must go beyond just sharing a new understanding if the practical aspects of this research as a DBA thesis is to be realised. The language here stops short of that, being about reaching a better understanding, of self-reflection and of replacing wrong assumptions with something closer to the truth. Importantly, there is nothing here about reaching an absolute truth. And as importantly, there is a foundation here of both researcher and interviewee being on the same journey, together, but from subjectively different starting points and perhaps with different motivations.

In discussing the alethic branch of hermeneutics Alvesson and Skoldberg have some interesting points of view about links between natural and cultural sciences (2000:53), for example that both are "... irrevocably marked by interpretations all the way down to the level of data ...". But the heart of this approach, I think, is the rejection of the distinction between meaning and significance, and the adoption of "... a focus on how the actual situation of understanding works ..." perhaps to the extent that "... the very process of understanding [is] more important than its result ..." (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000:59). This is an interesting observation and suggests that hermeneutic research is valuable as a prompt for learning for researcher and researched as much as a mechanism to improve understanding.

The hermeneutic approach involved me in identifying a small number of aspects of leadership, which the literature suggested may be influential in defining or describing leadership in the civil service, and using that material to inform my initial interviews. In Chapter 3 I describe how I arrived at identifying these aspects of leadership and how that led to forming my initial questions.

There is a major criticism of hermeneutics, or indeed all interpretivist approaches, that the allowed subjective position of the researcher so colours the work that the outputs and outcomes – the data and the conclusion – are invalid. The epistemological commitment here is subjective, the stance constructionist, so no

research can be free from the taint of the researchers own knowledge, understanding and assumptions, and neither can the reader consult the data except through their own subjective, and coloured, eyes. The aim of the researcher must not only be to admit to their bias and try to account for it openly so that the reader can make their own judgement but to go much further since "... the researcher is not looking at the experience of the subject alone; there is also the position of the interpreter as the scene unfolds, and in the process of interpretation" (McAuley 2004: 194). As Alvesson and Deetz put it "... recognising the interpretive nature of research means that no data, except possibly those on trivial matters, are viewed as unaffected by the construction of the researcher ..." (2000:113). Of course, the 'construction of the researcher' may map quite closely onto the construction of the interviewees, for example in this case where I am a member of the population from which interviewees are drawn. But that leads to other concerns about familiarity and assumed and unprovided for cultural effects. Ironically, the same authors go on to use 'leadership' as an example of a conventional idea or word that researchers must avoid prematurely applying; in this case one can hardly avoid the word (one must have a shared vocabulary with the interviewees), but the research aimed to uncover precisely the meaning of the term which the authors here suggest could be the problem in using it in the first place. Slightly oddly, Alvesson and Deetz predict the outcome of their imagined research into leadership and say "... it is likely that careful interpretive work will show that the 'leader' holds a position that is far from always being salient in everyday work, and that leadership as a quality of behaviour/social relations is often ambiguous and precarious and that it is only relatively rarely present ..." (2000:114). As we will see, this research doesn't find that leadership is particularly ambiguous nor that it is rarely present: but the point is taken nevertheless, as Goulding (1999:865) puts it "... adopting the subjective position ..." is problematic, especially if there is to be more than "... just verbatim descriptions ... [and] some interpretation becomes essential ...", as, of course, it most certainly will.

It has been argued that hermeneutics can be based on a realist ontology, and that analysis can be made through grounded theory techniques. As I have already noted, Alvesson and Skolberg (2000) discuss this and so does McAuley (2004: 198) but neither do it with much enthusiasm or conviction and I reject for the purpose of this research, the notion that I can both account for my subjectivism and maintain an objective stance.

I have described hermeneutics as an interpretivist approach. However, some draw a distinction between interpretivist and critical research approaches. As Alvesson and Deetz (2000) put it "... the intellectual role ... for the critical researcher is ... one of enabling an open discourse among the various social stakeholders ... [rather] than one of establishing a superior insight or the authoritative establishment of a truth ..." (p139). This goes back to my earlier point about the hermeneutic continuum running from the avuncular to the revolutionary. Alvesson (with Deetz now rather than with Skolberg as before) is saying that the latter end of the continuum is the critical approach, and that sounds right to me. As they said earlier in the same text, "... critical studies have the most explicit set of value commitments, and most direct attention to moral and ethical issues ... much of the discourse has a suspicious or therapeutic tone ..." (Alvesson and Deetz 2000:35). Whilst not making any claim to a therapeutic benefit, I would be content to say this thesis fits well with this definition of critical research.

However, this distinction may not be utterly clear. My awareness of the political and cultural characteristics in the research environment and my assumptions about the subjective understandings of those characteristics by the individual interviewees, played a significant part in the background of the research, and must be acknowledged. Some of the interviewees may take the view that they are acting independently of those general characteristics, and I agree with the statement "... we participate in creating what we experience as independent from, and external to, ourselves" (Johnson and Duberley 2000:63).

This leads to the conclusion that one cannot expect to find a comfortable consensus in the 'open discourse'. Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000:120) put it well "... communicative competence is no more capable of optimization than any other social attribute or ideal ... it is often argued that rationally grounded consensus is often futile since real preferences and conflicts of interest do not usually yield to the force of superior argument". They say that Habermas himself admitted the problem (page 121), and found refuge in a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate compromise, in which the former is "... rationally grounded..."; it is not clear how this is assessed, who for example decides what is legitimate and what illegitimate?

Critical theory and hermeneutics

As a pair critical theory and hermeneutics work well together. It is not an inevitable pairing, however, as I have already said some authors would link hermeneutics with a realist ontology. The two have quite different histories; hermeneutics predates critical theory by centuries. In an admittedly light hearted passage Alvesson and Skoldberg contrast the biblical connection of hermeneutics with, in their view, the anti-religious outlook of critical theory. For the latter "... in so far as salvation comes in at all, it is a question of being saved *from* religion ..." (2000: 239). That may be going too far, even in jest, but it underlines the point that the two are not automatic bed fellows but a pair that works well in the context of this research.

Reflexivity

To the mix of critical theory and hermeneutics I must now add 'reflexivity'. Neither critical theory nor hermeneutics is about looking for and finding absolute truths. Both require interpretation and subjective understanding of data that is already subjective. This multiple subjectivity can give rise to multiple re-interpretation of material which, if taken to extremes, leads to the problems, already discussed, of

never ending deconstruction in postmodernism. The process must be moderated and useful outcomes found and the mechanism for that is reflexivity. Alvesson and Skoldberg define this as "... reflection ... in conjunction with interpretation at several levels ..." (2000: 238) by which they mean that data, awareness of the interpretative act, context and representation and authority, and the ways each of these levels interact with the others. They emphasise what I consider to be the essential characteristics of this when they say that reflexive interpretation " ... implies there are no self-evident, simple or unambiguous rules or procedures, and that crucial ingredients are the researcher's judgement, intuition, ability to 'see and point something out ...' not only with the data but also the researcher outside the research role and with the reader" (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000: 248). The intention of this process is that I, as a professional practitioner, can draw sensible and useful conclusions from the data that are, within the bounds of my approach described here, valid and authoritative.

Methodology

There are several possible methodologies for this research that didn't suit my purpose. These approaches require a search for a generalisable truth that is sufficiently definable at the outset to allow appropriate questions to be asked; I was looking for subjective and context specific 'understandings'. I ruled out grounded theory because the data collected was not the only input to the work; my own knowledge and commitment played a part. But interviewing (perhaps more strictly a 'method'), ethnography and discourse analysis were considered.

As I have already explained, I started from the position that the subjective perspective of both researcher and interviewee made a purely positivistic stance impossible for this work. That is not to say, however, that there is no agreed social construct that is 'leadership' – clearly one can set out with a definition so that all who care to can share it – but I do maintain that the interpretation that individuals and groups place on such a definition will differ, not just as a

consequence of their own subjectivity, but also to take account of different situations and different social constructions. When the definition of leadership or leadership behaviours emanates not from the group itself but is imposed from outside (or from above, as in DfES) then the interpretation of it is problematic, and a shared understanding more difficult.

Ethnography has a well-earned place in the hearts of many social scientists not least due to the pioneering and exciting work of people such as Garfinkel. But the picture that is generally painted of ethnography is one of full immersion in a culture and of widely drawn research questions investigated over a considerable period of time. Gill and Johnson (1997) say that ethnographers "... arrive at an understanding of the various cultures and sub-cultures prepotent in ... organizational settings ...", and that ethno-methodologists "... attempt to uncover and examine the 'taken for granted' meanings and expectations that underpin ... courses of action" (Garfinkel, cited in Gill and Johnson 1994:97-98). Both these things chime with me. The fact that I am in the midst of the activities I have researched, means that I am well positioned to understand (subjectively of course) the cultures and meanings involved, and my views are already coloured by them. This is a qualifying condition for using the label 'ethnography' according to Alvesson and Deetz (2000:200). But the "... struggle between closeness and distance, between being familiar with the site under study and being able not to be caught by this familiarity ..." (Alvesson and Deetz 2000:208) remains a challenge, to be handled at least in part by reflexivity. But for them, conducting interviews is "... an important part of ethnography...", not its whole, and the term 'ethnography' is best reserved for "... studies involving longer periods of fieldwork ..." in which an "... interest in cultural issues ..." is a key component (Alvesson and Deetz 2000:75). Crotty (1998) too makes the point about the depth of the relationship between researcher and subject when he says, "...for ethnography, then, as for symbolic interactionism that now commonly forms its matrix, the notion of taking the place of the other is central" (1998:76). There is a strong element, therefore, of more than recording and learning about the perspectives of interviewees. One needs

almost to become one of them, to be drawn into their culture; in my case I was already in the culture, a member of the same group of people as my interviewees. But I started this research with no real intention of investigating 'culture' in the sense of an overall way of behaving; nor was I contemplating a study 'involving longer periods of fieldwork'.

Whilst I think my approach would probably qualify in part as ethnographic, I am not intending to immerse myself in, or explore, the culture of the group of interviewees, and there is no intention at this stage of a long term period of field work, or a longitudinal study. To use term, therefore, would be misleading.

A colleague of mine is researching in the hermeneutic manner using discourse analysis as a tool. There was the opportunity to do the same myself because the outputs from my interviews are transcripts of what was said, of the words used at the time and in their context. A simple analysis of that may not be enough to discover whether there are underlying themes repeated in the interviews, which might throw light on the meaning given to the term 'leadership' by individual interviewees or by groups of them. The dominant discourse, the Department's own published stand on leadership, may come through whether or not interviewees want it to, and whether or not it is the meaning they would otherwise use. This is doubly so because the interviews were in the office, with a researcher, me, who is a colleague, and will be published, albeit anonymously. I considered techniques to help me strip off those layers of confusion and attempt to identify the underlying position. So discourse analysis might have been a tool to help me understand better what people understood by the term.

Discourse analysis "... implies a critical critique of the so-called realistic view of language ..." and "... emphasises that language is by its nature metaphorical, figurative and context-dependent ..." (Alvesson and Skolberg 2000:202). This assumes a number of things including that "... language is both constructed and constructive ... the same phenomenon can be described in several different ways

... there is no foolproof way yet of handling these variations ..." (Potter and Wetherell (1987:35), in Alvesson and Skolberg 2000:205). The aim is to treat what the interviewees say in its own right, taking into account nuances, contradictions and areas of vagueness, but not adding in notions about what may have been meant.

Of course, one could extend – or widen – this approach to include post-structuralism and Barthes' 'death of the author' (Barthes 1977 quoted in Crotty 1998:2000), which focuses firmly on the text rather than the intention of the author. Or bring in Derrida and his version of deconstruction. Derrida said that speech has been traditionally privileged as being closer to truth than the written word. Derrida called this phonocentrism, and argued 'there is nothing outside the text' (see Crotty 1998:207). For Johnson and Duberley, the difficulties of relativism are raised by Derrida's argument, which they discuss in their chapter on postmodernist epistemology. They say that words for Derrida have "... no single discoverable true meaning, only numerous different interpretations ... signifiers get their meaning only from other signifiers within language ..." (Johnson and Duberley 2000:96). Crotty has Derrida in his section on post-structuralism and quotes Wolin as saying "... [Derrida] has intentionally avoided associating deconstruction with the postmodern turn in criticism and the arts ..." (Wolin 1992, in Crotty 1998:209): Manning and Cullum-Swan (1998:255) would agree.

For me, and for hermeneutics more generally, the key issue is to seek to understand how people make sense of their everyday lives. Whilst interview texts are dependent on the cultural and organisational context and on the emotional state of the people involved, to accept that the cultural boundaries are re-drawn (in part) by the words used in the interview is to take this issue too far (to achieve cultural change would involve persuading others whereas the interview is a one-to-one event with gaining a better understanding of phenomena under consideration, the goal). This would be represented in interview techniques by the social constructionist school, whose aim is not to "... gain insight into the 'real' experience

of the interviewee ...” (King 2004: 13) but to explore the discursive practices available. Whether or not the proponents of discourse analysis and post-structuralism are right, to follow their lead would take me away from my goal, and made the interviewees work separate from the interviewees themselves. My interviews follow the model King (2004: 12) calls ‘phenomenological’ where the researcher’s pre-understandings are identified and personal reflection is a necessity.

However, for me the importance, and the inevitability, of my own subjectivity being part of the research rules out discourse analysis, if that implies relying solely on the text of interviews. My own role as interviewer will have already coloured the texts. I am therefore somewhere between the total immersion of ethnography and the comparative distance of discourse analysis.

Methods

The focus of the research is the individual respondent’s interpretation of the term ‘leadership’. One could collect data about this in several ways, for example by questionnaire, participant observation, or by interview. The first two seemed to me inappropriate. In a hermeneutic approach one doesn’t know where the research will take one, so framing a single set of valid questions becomes impossible. The questions would inevitably lead the respondent and drive the responses, which is the opposite of the approach I wanted. Neither do I believe one set of questions would be rich enough to delve far beneath the surface; nor flexible enough to cover the ground from the varied perspectives of individual interviewees.

Participant observation would be very interesting, but since my involvement would change the behaviour of the participants in ways I could not foresee the data I would obtain would be of limited value. In addition, since I worked with the interviewees I preferred to have a carefully defined period when data collection

was happening and when it was not. In order to offset as far as is practical for the social constructionism of data collection, it is better to use interviews as a method of collecting text for later analysis. This had two other benefits: first, I could very simply say to the interviewees that their interviews represented the full extent of their engagement in my research thus clearly limiting their involvement; second, it made my job as researcher more straightforward and, perhaps, easier.

One of the key aspects of interviewing is the possibility of deliberately engineering an interactive relationship with the interviewee. I specifically looked for two things in the interviews and the later analysis; first, for the interviewee to steer me away from those aspects of leadership that they do not recognise as important, and to guide me towards ones either already under consideration or not that they thought important, and secondly, to try to identify how, if at all, the civil service top management rhetoric is being made into 'common sense' by the interviewees, and the effect that has on their interpretation of the rhetoric and their daily lives. The interactive part of the process was a very important ingredient that is missing from other methods.

So I chose to use interviews as my method. Alvesson and Deetz (2000:194) describe interviews as a "... difficult but highly useful method ...". It is "... the most common method of data gathering in qualitative research ..." (King 2004:11), which is flexible, well understood by participants, and delivers rich data (King 1994:14). I like Kvale's definition of a qualitative research interview which is "an interview, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena", to which he added "neither in the interview phase nor in the later analysis is the purpose primarily to obtain quantifiable responses" (quoted by King 1994:14).

It is also worthwhile reflecting on the point that "... most people like talking about their work... but rarely have the opportunity to do so with interested outsiders"

(King 2004:21). This means they may be prone to exaggeration or over-enthusiasm and that needs to be considered in the analysis.

Issues to consider in researching by interview

Interviews can range in type from spontaneous to so structured that the interviewer scores responses in a mathematical manner. The role of the interviewee changes along the same continuum, from participant, helping to shape the course of the interview, to subject, responding to fixed questions. King (1994) identifies a middle position, which he calls 'structured open-response interviews', which he admits suffers from being "... neither fish nor fowl ..." (King 1994:16). Interestingly, he also identifies the problematic interviewer/interviewee relationship this can spawn, as the latter is neither solely a participant nor solely a subject.

The role of interviewee as participant is key to hermeneutics, so I did not conduct interviews in what Marshall considers the traditional way, with a clear distinction between interviewer and interviewee. On the other hand, as Marshall puts it "... discourse analysts see the interview as a form of social interaction and the interviewer's contribution is seen to be important. Both interviewer and interviewee are seen as constructively drawing on a range of interpretive resources which are of interest in the subsequent analysis" (Marshall 1994:95). King generalises the same point and applies it to qualitative interviews in general "... the relationship is part of the research process, not a distraction from it ..." (2004:11). However, Marshall goes on to say that interviews in discourse analysis are not seen as a "... a means of measuring the genuine views of a participant ...", but as "... a means of exploring the varied ways of making sense ... available to participants ..." (Marshall 1994:95). He says the concern is not at the level of the individual interviewee. This was going too far in the opposite direction, hence my rejection of discourse analysis as a method for this research. What is important is that "... things that are simple to ... extract from interviews are not really what critical theory sees as an essential subject of research" (Alvesson and Skoldberg

2000:131). So names and dates, for example, may be interesting, and are simple to extract, but the core of the interview is the individual's understanding and that may not be at all easy to synthesise.

Gendered interviews raise the same issue from another point of view. Fontana and Frey (1998:65) argue that the 'traditional' form of interview is "... embedded in the masculine culture ..." and excludes "... traits such as sensitivity, emotionality, and others that are culturally viewed as feminine". A way to redress this imbalance they suggest is "... the development of a closer relationship between interviewer and the respondent ..." to eradicate the 'traditional' hierarchical relationship. This is all critical for me.

Using King's checklists (King 1994:16-17 or "... interview guide..." (King 2004:15), an interesting casualisation, or perhaps, Americanisation, of terminology over 10 years) it was clear that I needed to consider what he calls a 'qualitative research' interview rather than a 'structured' or 'open-response' interview; Saunders et al (1997:212) call this 'in-depth' or 'non-directive'. Further, Fontana and Frey (1998:56) suggest that unstructured in-depth interviewing, which they call ethnographic interviewing, goes hand in hand with participant observation. That is a step further than I intend for reasons discussed above.

I interviewed 12 civil servants in the Department for Education and Skills, in Sheffield. The number was not fixed in advance and was in the end determined by the extent to which I reached a form of 'closure'. Whether twelve is a sufficient number is an interesting question. As King says this is "... not solely a matter of research logistics ..." although that was an important consideration in my case. Interviews need to be planned, scheduled, conducted, and the texts typed and analysed, so a large number is unfeasible. The validity of the research outputs depends not on volume but on the extent to which a "... task does not require a large number of texts to ensure representativeness, as it is assumed that these practices and resources are shared within a social context..." (King 2004:16).

Neither, of course, even with a large number of texts, can we be sure of capturing all viewpoints, so complete comprehensiveness is unattainable both theoretically and practically. So we must accept that the interviews in this study capture a sample of the views held. And that no one interview can be privileged over others – all are of equal validity. As we will see, even a sample of this size shows a considerable consensus of views on the main issue and thus extending the interview schedule to 15 or 20 people is unlikely to have thrown up fundamentally new insights. The majority were with Divisional Managers (with typically between 30 and 50 staff) and Team Leaders (who usually have between 8 and 12 staff). Two were with Directors line managing Divisional Managers. I am in this group myself and knew most, but not all, of the interviewees well.

It would, of course, have been possible to select my interview sample differently, either by grade or location, for example. I have chosen the grades I have because they have both clear senior management functions and responsibilities as well as senior work responsibilities. As to location, the Department has offices in London, Darlington and Runcorn as well as Sheffield, so comparative studies of the same issues in different locations could have been carried out. Or indeed, studies in different Government departments could be made. But that would have broadened the enquiry considerably, and for practical purposes I decided to keep to Sheffield.

In selecting interviewees I was aware of the dangers of bias in selecting those I know well, or whom I think interesting or important, or who are easily accessible. Of course, interviewees could be selected randomly. In the event I chose to interview all the Divisional Managers (DMs) in one policy area, thus reducing selection bias, plus a selection of team leaders (the grade below DM) and former DMs, and two Directors (the grade above DM) to give a balance of views. I was also not overly concerned about where to conduct interviews – I used interviewees own offices or a neutral office in the same building.

In Chapter 7, under the heading of personal reflexions, I discuss the possible impact of me on my interviewees.

The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. The texts were analysed first using a software package called NVivo, which is used for coding text and collating related passages. The use of what might be described as a positivistic (or, perhaps, modernist) tool in a critical setting is justified by the significant role of the researcher in the coding process even with a software package. Deciding which categories to set and which pieces of text should fall into which categories was subjective, and the success of that part of the venture can be judged in reading Chapters 4, 5 and 6. The use of NVivo helped to marshall the pieces of text in a way I was comfortable with; cutting and pasting pieces of paper onto a large roll of paper – as practiced by some before computers were commonplace and still used by some today – would have done the same job, but much more slowly.

This process allowed me to identify themes that were common across many or all interviewees, and to identify differences. Where these common themes supported hunches coming out of the work reported in Chapter 3 then the hunch was now to a greater or lesser extent confirmed and could be allowed to suggest a conclusion. Such themes were subjected to further tests against the literature to build them up into substantial evidence.

Differences could in themselves be suggestive but where the data failed to support a hunch, it was dropped.

NVivo of course is a technical solution; the key issue is how to code the data, for example what groupings to use, within which groups should there be further divisions, and the words to use to describe (or name) the groups. Then there is the issue of how to decide which text is assigned to which group or sub-group, or, a technique that NVivo makes easy, to which groups if the text could apply to more than one.

The process is simple to describe if complex and very time consuming to work through. The interview transcripts produced a mass of data which could be assembled in general terms against the areas for questioning set out in the annex. For example, there were data in each interview that fitted under the general heading of 'what makes a good leader' and other data that fitted under 'leadership and Ministers'. These broad headings were then broken down into sub-headings suggested not by the areas for questioning but by the data itself; that is, the interviewees were unconsciously generating new sub-headings, and sub-sub-headings, that became apparent only once the interview data was analysed. Sub-headings needed to be supported by data from several interviews if they were to become substantive issues for consideration, although one or two unsupported comments have been included where they add a particular insight (and where that has happened they are clearly described as one-off statements).

So, from a single mass of data, broad headings in the interview key questions and sub-headings derived from the data analysis made up the framework for the work of breaking down the data into manageable groups. As the analysis went on, this grouping work became sharper (as data was assigned more and more often to clear emerging themes amongst the sub-groups) and once the process was completed, the groups naturally associated themselves into three main areas which became the chapters of evidence for this thesis.

The influences on these coding and analysis decisions are the same as the key influences in the research as a whole. The background influences, which are very important, and must be recognised as such, are the researcher's own pre-understanding (as coloured by the myriad of influences on them as an individual, including the influence of the researcher's own tutors), and the research itself in terms of study, reading and discussion with colleagues. Against that complex background, the foreground influence is the research data (as interpreted by the researcher, of course). The words used by the interviewees must be a significant

contribution in decisions on naming code groups and assigning data to those groups. It would be convenient to say that it was the research data that drove coding decisions but in fact the research data is only one of the drivers; it is inevitable and allowable, that my own pre-understanding had an affect. However, I think it is fair to say that the desire to ensure that the research conclusions are drawn from the data in a way that would be recognised by others as authoritative and meaningful kept me on my toes. That implicit external pressure, and then, later, examination or peer review, is a powerful influence.

With all those influences, checks and balances, text was assigned to groups of like material, and if the group became unwieldy, to sub-groups. This was often a straightforward process (for example texts on the futility of attempting to 'teach' leadership selected themselves) but sometimes it proved difficult to do that, in which case NVivo made it easy to assign text to more than one group for later analysis. Once the groups were established, the text, especially where a broad consensus or desensus formed, chose the next step, and the results can be seen in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. Where matters were less clear I made the decision either to exclude it – which is justified on the ground that I was looking for consensus – or to comment on it if it provided an interesting side-light or suggested areas for further research.

The use of computer software in the analysis of qualitative data has been the subject of debate with some writers arguing for the systematic collection of material on the use of computers in this field so that a database for codification could be built, with others arguing that that would be neither feasible nor desirable (see Bryman and Burgess (1994: 216/7) for a summary). But in general, qualitative research does not contain masses of detail on how the data was analysed. As Olesen et al (1994: 111) put it "... there are, of course, good reasons for sparse accounts. Details of every analytic decision in even a small project could well swamp the findings".

Reliability and validity of interview data are now often regarded as positivistic values that cannot apply to critical research. As Alvesson and Skoldberg put it "... critical theorists and a whole host of other non-positivistic scholars have gone beyond the truth criterion ..." adding "... what may be 'true' in one context may not be so in another. After all, published research also affects social conditions..." (2000: 271), which undermines the positivistic notion the researcher can interact neutrally and objectively with the environment. As Johnson et al put it "... a subjective view of epistemology repudiates the possibility of a neutral observational language: language does not allow access to, or representation of, reality" (2006). The search for an objective 'truth' is not part of the equation, so the quest is not to eliminate bias but to acknowledge it. Data obtained in interviews is not neutral, but "... constructions made by the researcher to a higher (interviews) or lower (observation) degree in interaction with the research subjects ..." (Alvesson and Deetz 2000:112). King suggests two steps that should be taken to maximise reliability, or "authenticity" as Johnson et al (2006) might put it. First, he suggests "... researchers should explicitly recognise their presuppositions ... and make a conscious effort to set these aside". As he says, researchers "... should allow themselves to be surprised by the findings". Both King and Saunders et al 1997 refer to the importance of interviewer preparation in the minimising of bias. Second, he suggests the involvement of other researchers, with room for discussions about disagreements (King 1994:31).

This should also help with a problem identified by Alvesson and Deetz (2000:194), which is "... whether accounts in interviews refer to something external to the interview situation and the language used ... or are a reflection of the interview situation as a complex social setting ...". As the authors admit, this is almost in the 'too difficult' category and one has to "... manoeuvre between two unhelpful positions" (2000:194). It is here that self-reflexivity becomes crucial. If, as Alvesson and Deetz (and post-structuralists) say "... language does not stand in a one-to-one relationship to (partially) non-linguistic phenomena such as behaviours, thoughts and feelings ..." (Alvesson and Deetz 2000:112), then it is crucial to

ensure that the researcher responds to the idea that "... reflexivity involves the self-critical consideration of one's own assumptions and consistent considerations of alternative interpretive lines and the use of different research vocabularies ..."

(Alvesson and Deetz 2000:112).

A key issue here is to avoid jumping to what may seem obvious conclusions. Alvesson and Deetz (2000:117) give the example of describing an interviewee as a '50-year old male manager', facts that might be true in one sense, but which might mislead in others. For example, the man may be a successful transformational leader, something more often associated with women than men, and, therefore, not a 'manager' in one sense at all. Any one description is poorer than a multiple view, and might stop alternative descriptions being uncovered.

A major consideration for this approach to research is to be clear about the status of the outputs of the research. If hermeneutics is not about discovering a truth in a positivistic sense then what is it about and how can the outputs be legitimised? As McAuley (2003:196) puts it there are two ways "... one lies in the professionalization of the hermeneutic researcher; the other is the methodic processes through which hermeneutic work is conducted". I would add a third, which McAuley implies but I think needs setting out clearly. Hermeneutic research is legitimised as well by the recognition and acceptance of the validity of the outputs by a consensus of the peers of the researcher and, in my case, even more importantly, by a consensus of those interviewed.

Conclusions

This chapter brings together a number of very important aspects of research, aspects which can be discussed separately but which must come together to make an authoritative package that does the job set out. The task is to research leadership, to get beneath the everyday words of civil servants, to go beyond the 'taken-for-granted', and uncover a new layer of understanding. I have described

how neither a positivistic, nor postmodern, approach would be satisfactory, and why a critical approach is appropriate. I have also discussed why the use of hermeneutics and reflexivity is a sensible course in the context of the task. Finally, I justified the use of interviews as a method that fitted the job.

I make no claim that this is the only package of ontology, epistemology, methodology and method that would work. But I do maintain that it is an appropriate choice for this research. Indeed, I would say that given the alternatives available, whilst there may be packages as appropriate as mine, none is better.

CHAPTER 3

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

Introduction

This chapter explores some of the academic literature on leadership, suggests an analysis of leadership based both on that literature and on corporate civil service statements on leadership, and ends by identifying the questions to be asked in the research interviews and the hunches on which they are based. I use Northouse (1997) as a base from which to consider different leadership models, bringing in others where appropriate. The review of the literature is broadly based but partial, partly because there is so much literature on leadership that some limitations are necessary on purely practical grounds, and partly because in an hermeneutic study a second round of more precisely targeted literature is introduced in the evidence chapters, here Chapters 4, 5 and 6. The review is centred around Northouse (1997) for two reasons: first, one needs a starting point and Northouse is both convenient and has been used by others for the same purpose, and second, he concerns himself with the traditional models of leadership which, I think it is fair to assume, may be relevant to a traditional organisation such as the civil service.

Then I look at three different corporate sources and distil from them a sense of what leadership means to the organisation. These are government documents which should tell us, implicitly or explicitly, what leadership is about, what it is made up of and what it should mean to civil servants. I also take into account an all-staff awayday which allows me to compare the indications from the literature and from corporate documentation with the views of staff in more junior grades. By comparing this with Northouse it is possible to identify an emerging corporate discourse using academic models, which then leads on to questions to investigate as initial hunches in the research.

Leadership literature

Leadership is one of the many facets of management and organisational research that is hard to pin down in a few words, not that there is a shortage of attempts. It is common for writers on leadership to spend a moment or two saying how difficult it is to define the term, and then to write books and articles as if the term had been successfully defined. For example, Manz et al (1992) say there are "countless perspectives" and that there are "currently at least one hundred accepted academic definitions" (1992:276). Jago (1982) says there have been "thousands of empirical investigations over the last 75 years" but each interpretation of leadership remains incomplete; Kets de Vries (1990) says, "competing theories abound". Bolden (2004) suggests that in 2001-02 an average of 419 articles a month were published on leadership. Worse still, not only are there competing and contradictory theories and models, but Yukl (1989) says they are "... beset with conceptual weaknesses and lack strong empirical support ... most of the results are contradictory and inconclusive". There is a widespread agreement that leadership comes in more than one variety (for example Northouse (1997) has nine 'approaches' and Rickards and Clark (2006) use four texts as a basis for their discussion), and a developing view that leadership as a phenomenon cannot be discussed in isolation from issues such as gender.

Northouse (1997:3) defines leadership as "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal". What might Northouse mean by 'common goal'? In terms of team sport the idea seems clear enough but what about leadership displayed by a political leader? Is the 'group' then defined as those who choose to follow, or could the group be, for example, the country's adult population who are entitled to vote? The two need a different kind of leadership. We need to include notions of vision, direction or authority and something about how such influence can be expressed (dictat, democratic agreement, trial and error?). It is so widely drawn a definition that it could include

almost all human activity involving more than one person. As Bolden (2004) points out this definition locates the individual as the source of leadership. Jago (1982) pins things down a little more. He sees leadership both as a process, in simple terms, 'influence', and as a property, qualities or characteristics of someone who influences. For Grint, however, leadership is broader still, implicitly "an essential element of life" although despite it being an "exponentially accelerating arena [for research], ... this does not mean we are getting ever nearer to understanding what leadership is" (Grint 1997:2).

Others approach the subject from a different perspective. For example, Perren and Burgoyne (2002) have drawn up a framework of eight management and leadership abilities whilst resolving not to let their discussion "... dissolve into definitional and philosophical battles leaving their perpetrators too tired to take useful action ...". As it happens, this was in a commission from a government funded body, the Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership, so they were probably right to get down to practicalities very quickly.

But is it more than what an individual says or does? Fiedler says "... it is meaningless to talk about leadership outside the situational context ..." and that "... the active ingredient ..." in the situation is the degree to which the situation "... causes uncertainty and stress and therefore anxiety ..." (Fiedler 1993:2). Grint moved on from his 1997 comment above, and by 2000 had concluded that "... the more I read [about leadership] the less I understood ..." (Grint 2000:1), not only because more and more reading exposed the deepening of his ignorance, but the more he read the more contradictory the conclusions he reached. Bolden (2004) concludes that it is a subjective, complex, concept like "... 'love', 'freedom' and 'happiness' ..." and that, anyway, defining it depends on "... one's theoretical stance ...".

This research is essentially about how civil servants understand leadership so these academic theories whilst important as context, may or may not be relevant professionally. Let's build a picture of the range of theories already identified.

Northouse as a starting point

I am not about to embark here on a comprehensive analysis of the literature on leadership even if that was possible and desirable, or to cover all the styles or types of leadership described in the theory. Further references to the literature will appear in Chapters 4 to 6, but what I want to do now is to look at some of the leadership theories that have been around for some time, as a jumping off point for the research.

I need a starting point in the literature, and have chosen the book "Leadership Theory and Practice" edited by Peter Northouse (1997). This is not because it is the only, or a seminal, stepping off point but because it attempts to set out succinctly in a series of chapters, most by Northouse himself, what one might refer to as the traditional set of approaches to leadership (an alternative would have been Sadler (2003) but his treatment of different styles of leadership is a good deal briefer). Northouse also goes into other, perhaps as yet non-traditional approaches, such as feminism and what Bowman (1997) refers to as 'popular' approaches. Taking a single book as the start of the journey is not, of course, the only way one might tackle this task, and I will draw distinctions and parallels between Northouse and other writers as we go along. [I also recognise that this could be restrictive but I will introduce other writers as I make progress.]

I am not the only one to choose a limited stepping-off point. Rickards and Clark (2006:21) choose Northouse as one of their four leadership maps. They say he "... excludes leaders who are extreme and tyrannical ..." and includes "... leaders who emerge ... and those who are appointed ..." and that suits my research very well.

Another reason why this is a sensible way for me to start to look at leadership is that Northouse uses traditional models that ought to be of interest and relevance to a structured bureaucracy with a long history such as the civil service. And if they are not relevant that in itself would be interesting. An alternative starting point much nearer home would be the Government's own report "Strengthening Leadership" (PIU 2000), written by the Performance and Innovation Unit, set up by the Prime Minister as part of the Cabinet Office. This has a literature review (at its annex D) which does something similar to Northouse and Sadler's discussions of different theories. However, it starts from the premise that trait and contingency leadership theories are the "... two most common ..." which is not a prejudice I want to start with. Although not primarily an academic tract, the PIU report is important as a key influence on thinking about leadership in the civil service, but not, for me, the right foundation for this chapter. I will come back to it later in this chapter.

So putting aside other ways in to this discussion, let me start by describing the approaches set out in Northouse, and reviewing very briefly what the authors say each approach has as its own distinctive contribution. I will divide the theories into two camps, which I call 'Human Approaches' and 'Social Approaches'. The former focus more on the individual as leader, without excluding teams or context; the latter focus more on the relationship between the leader and their followers.

Human Approaches

We start with the trait approach. This is based on the notion that great leaders (such as Mahatma Gandhi) are born not made. It was in favour in the early years of the twentieth century, waned in the middle years and, Northouse says, there was a resurgence of interest in recent years and is now "... alive and well..." (Northouse 1997:14). By distilling the research findings of others, Northouse identifies five major leaderships traits, intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity and sociability (contrast this with the PIU report which has curiosity, self-

confidence, ambition, self-control and empathy (PIU 2000:para D2)). As Northouse says, despite numerous studies the list of important traits is very uncertain, and any list would not separate traits from the situations in which they were to be deployed. Neither has research. Indeed, the personality tests from which these traits are said to be identified can be said to construct rather than discover such traits. The approach implies that the situation is unimportant, and thus it is the "... selection of leaders rather than their development ..." (Grint 2000:2) that is key. However, trait theories have failed to remain in the forefront of professional practice because "... trait theories failed to be confirmed by observation ..." and take for granted "... the existence of natural born leaders ..." (Rickard and Clark 2006:32). This contrasts markedly with the prevailing culture in the DfES which is that everyone should develop through on- and off-the-job training; every member of staff has a development plan which must link with the Professional Skills for Government training programme (which I cover in more detail in Chapter 5).

Next is the style approach. Rather than emphasising the personality of leaders, this approach focuses on behaviour, and in particular task behaviours and relationship behaviours. This appears to be the same as Reddin's 30 Theory in Sadler (2003: 73). As Northouse puts it "... the style approach offers a means of assessing in a general way the behaviour of leaders ... [whose] impact on others occurs through the task they perform as well as in the relations they create" (Northouse 1997:41). Northouse says that researchers have tried to identify a leadership style that would be best in all circumstances, but have not been able to do so, perhaps, again, because situations play a crucial role. In fact, researchers have not been able to draw a reliable link between behaviours and "... outcomes such as morale, job satisfaction and productivity" (Northouse 1997:42). That isn't surprising. Researchers have had enormous difficulty linking anything at all directly with morale, job satisfaction and productivity, so that a cause and effect relationship can be identified and used to develop a way to motivate workers. It is arguable that theories of motivation to work come to an end with Vroom's

Expectancy Theory in 1964 (see Carter and Jackson 1994: 89) which was itself a radical departure from existing modernist theories in that it relied on subjectivity to explain how it worked. Thus mixing positivistic models of leadership with subjective issues such as morale is problematic. Jago (1982:330) says that the study of leadership is "independent" of the study of other areas such as motivation, but I do not believe it is possible to take one element of human activity in total isolation from all others and expect to get a rounded picture and a valid outcome.

If the situation in which leadership is exercised is a missing factor in the first two approaches, it is the core of the third, the situational approach. The basic premise is that "... different situations demand different kinds of leadership ..." and that effective leaders adapt their style to the "... demands of different situations" (Northouse 1997:53). The theory says there are two factors at play here, directive behaviour and supportive behaviour (one might compare that with the task and relationship behaviours in the style approach), which each come into play on a continuum from low to high impact. Thus there are four states in the situation approach, delegating (both behaviours low), supporting (supportive behaviour high), coaching (both high), and directing (directive behaviour high). Each of these four states represents a distinct style of leadership. The model builds in an element concerning the development for followers (called sub-ordinates by Northouse). The research under-pinning the model is lacking and "... raises questions concerning the theoretical basis of the approach" (Northouse 1997:58). Obeng (1997) also suggests that different types of leadership are necessary in different situations, but in this approach it is essential the leader knows what the situation is that they are in, and when that changes, and it is not clear how a leader is supposed to do that or what happens when they get it wrong.

The fourth approach is called contingency theory. There is more than one model that could claim this title, but Northouse defines the idea as "... a leader's effectiveness depends upon how well the leader's style fits the context ... effective

leadership is contingent on matching a leader's style to the right setting" (Northouse 1997:74). Fiedler (1993) developed a scale against which leaders would be measured to see whether they were more task or relationship orientated (these two terms have cropped up again), and as a consequence there is a great deal of empirical research to underpin the approach. The results obtained suggested that a task-orientated leader is the one to have for success in times of crisis or times when everything is going well; people-orientated leaders are best in other, in-between, times. There is criticism of the scale used to measure this (on grounds of a lack of face validity) and of the results obtained (it fails to explain why some leadership styles are more effective than others; and it suggests organisations must change situations to fit leaders). As in the situational approach, the contingency approach depend for its effectiveness on "... self-awareness and situational analysis ..." (Grint 2000:2) on the part of the leader so that he or she knows when to step into the leadership position, and, crucially, when to step out. However, Fiedler says that contingency theory is about situational factors that lead to leader anxiety that cause the leader to fall back on "...previous successful reinforced behaviour patterns ..." (Fiedler 1993:16). It is asking a lot for an anxious leader to be fully self-aware, so are Grint and Fiedler irreconcilable? And it is not clear whether Fiedler is suggesting the previous behaviour patterns will be appropriate in new, challenging, situations. Sadler says that Fiedler's work "... has long been held in high regard by academic students of leadership but practitioners find it difficult to come to terms with" (2003: 74).

Contingency theory has a comparatively long history. Chemers and Rice cite Fiedler's 1967 theory as standing "... at the centre of an important and growing interest in contingency theories of leadership" (1974:91) and they suggest the theory's predictive validity is "... well supported ..." but not "... the final answer to the study of leadership effects ..." (1974:123). Of course, if organisations design tasks to be as simple as possible (for example on assembly lines, or following scripts in call centres) then the leadership needed to influence workers in their

'common goal' (as Northouse puts it) is itself simple. That is, the context for contingency theory of leadership is itself simple. As Kerr (1974) argues

"human relations theorists have long maintained that tasks are, unfortunately, designed by organisations to be so simple that unintelligent employees can perform them best. It now begins to appear that efficiency may be further increased by hiring unintelligent managers as well."

Bass and Valenzi suggest problems with validity, for example "... our model is still mainly a primitive listing of variables ..." (1974:152), although Prien (1974) maintains that the problem is poorly designed research. This was all written some time ago but Northouse clearly believes the theory continues to be relevant, and the Government's own PIU Report says the same.

Of course, some of these reservations stem from opinions about results obtained by quantitative means, using statistical methods to measure aspects of human behaviour. This can be a highly questionable approach and can lead to the measurement not of understanding of leadership but of people's behaviour. The danger is that the researcher then makes the link back to leadership with no or insufficient recognition of the need for and value of reflexivity. There can be doubt as to the validity of the approach in the first place. That is not to say the research is of no value. The results of these studies are important contributors to our overall understanding, and the lack of general acceptance of their validity merely underlines the difficulty of finding an effective objective approach to the definition of leadership. But we need to be alive to the dangers as well as the benefits of triangulation using fundamentally different research methods with, perhaps, incompatible underlying epistemologies.

These first four approaches are about leaders themselves. The fifth approach is the path-goal approach which is about enhancing "... employee performance and employee satisfaction by focussing on employee motivation" (Northouse 1997:88).

I have already commented on the failure of research to identify links between motivation and leadership, but this theory of leadership is built on the expectancy theory of motivation, which has a beguiling simplicity. An effective leader tries to make up for deficiencies in the work environment so that subordinates can better meet their own goals, by making clear the path to attaining goals, and by removing obstacles in that path. The leader does that by adopting the most helpful leadership approach (for example, directive, supportive, participative, achievement-orientated, etc) in the situation concerned. Such a broad and flexible approach is inevitably criticised for making the link between leadership style and motivation unsure, something that research has not cleared up. Northouse also says the approach is "... complex ..." (1997:96). Well, human inter-relationships are complex, so that's not really surprising! But if the approach demands a rational leader to apply rational solutions to rational problems then its supporters will struggle to show how it applies in a work situation. Followers may not respond positively, or predictably, to a plea for objective enlightened self-interest when driven by their own subjective demands (see Chemers and Ayman 1993:329).

The final approach in this first group is the Leader-Member Exchange approach. This is different again, focussing as it does on the relationship between the leader and sub-ordinates. The theory says that, depending on the nature of the relationship, an in-group and an out-group develops based on the relationship itself, and the personalities of the people involved. For example, if a sub-ordinate is willing to "... go beyond their formal job description and the leader, in turn, does more for [them] ..." then that person becomes a member of the in-group (Northouse 1997:111). Out-group members are treated fairly by the leader but do not get special attention. There are some technical criticisms of the approach (on measurement for example), but it has an interesting moral and ethical problem around favouritism and discrimination (for example see Jago (1982:330) on the "trusted cadre" and the "hired hands").

Social Approaches

This second group of approaches, transformational, transactional and team leadership, are defined in terms of how leaders interact with followers. There is a strong ethical component in them (but Warsh, Bush and Clemens (1999) argue that to assume leadership is about "doing the right thing" and to ignore the dark side of leadership can distort the effort to learn about leadership). For many writers both the transformational and the transactional approach are covered together, although they are not portrayed as the same thing. For example, Northouse (and others such as House and Shamir (1993)) includes visionary and charismatic leadership in the transformational approach; the PIU report (PIU 2000) includes charismatic leadership under the trait approach. Northouse defines the transformational approach as one that "... changes and transforms individuals ..." is concerned with "... values, ethics, standards and long-term goals ..." and involving "... assessing followers motives, satisfying their needs, and treating them as full human beings" (1997:130). This is really a very ambitious definition and excludes all sorts of people one might have considered, if not transformational in this sense, certainly charismatic, for example Hitler. But Northouse sticks to his guns and uses Gandhi, again, Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy as examples of charismatic leaders. Hitler is excluded because his coercive use of power puts him outside the definition (Northouse 1997:144; but see also McClelland and Burnham (1976) on power and self-maturity). The essential distinction between transformational leadership and transactional leadership is that the former refers to a process that engages, motivates and "... raises the level of ... morality ..." in both leader and follower (Northouse 1997:131). This is not the line taken in the PIU report, which says that transformational leadership "... asserts that leaders can transform followers by persuading them to subordinate their individual wants to the needs of the collective ..." (PIU 2000: para D10). For Bass and Avolio the charisma factor is generally defined "... with respect to follower reactions as well as to the leader's behaviour ..." (1993:51), but they accept this can be either

participatory or directive in style (as can all the other factors in their reading of the transformational and transactional approach).

There are difficulties with all this, one being the lack of clarity. Northouse has transformational leadership as "... occurring along a continuum that incorporates several components of leadership ..." (1997:145). And despite the reciprocal nature of the leadership intervention it is hard to disentangle the style from the trait approach, and not easy to appreciate the two-way communication in it. One thinks more of Martin Luther King as a man who led from the front, than as a man who led through negotiating with sub-ordinates: the PIU definition fits more easily. Either way, the role of the follower is particularly important in this context, and the PIU report draws attention to the "... poverty of followership ..." in organisations where followers are unable to correct their leaders mistakes. There are things here to be said about whistle-blowers and devil's advocates and the role they play to protect organisations from the mistakes leaders make. In spite of any confusion that attaches to research into this approach, Bass and Avolio are sure that transformational leaders are more effective and give more satisfaction than transactional leaders (1993:65) and that charismatic leaders score highest of all.

It is interesting to note that Collins and Porras (1998) say that visionary companies will outlive their leaders, however charismatic they are; and Bowle (2000) suggests that Kant would reject "... instrumental theories of leadership and most charismatic theories ..." and would aim to turn followers into leaders, as opposed to engaging followers in a two-way communication. This underlines the diversity of view on the subject and the lack of a single firm foundation for researching into the nature of leadership.

The eighth approach is team leadership. The chapter in Northouse is written by Susan E. Kogler Hill who describes the theory as resting on leadership functions that "... cross two dimensions of behaviour, (a) monitoring versus taking action and (b) focussing on internal group issues versus external group issues ..." (Hill

1977:161). The leader's role is to "... take care of the unmet needs of the group ..." (Hill 1977:162) by analysing the situation and using the appropriate behaviours. In practice the theory is complex to use, and, indeed, Hill says, "... the entire model is not completely supported or tested ..." (1997:173). Part of the problem is that in a genuine team, the role of leader may be vested in a single person, shared or could even be a rotating responsibility amongst all the team members. Jago (1982:316) is another writer who touches on this.

Grint's Arts – the constitutive approach

I also want to consider another approach to leadership by Keith Grint, because it brings in another set of issues, specifically not from an objectivist point of view. In his book "The Arts of Leadership" Grint (2000) discusses leadership under four groupings, trait, contingency, situational and constitutive, the first three of which overlap with Northouse's approaches of the same name. But it is the fourth that is the focus of the book. For Grint, the constitutive approach "... questions the significance of the allegedly objective conditions that surround leaders ..." and suggests that what counts as a 'situation' and the 'appropriate' way of leading are "... interpretive and contestable issues ...". Since it is leaders who "... actively shape our interpretation of the environment ... and therefore the truth ..." it is they who set the 'situation' and thus the 'appropriate' way of leading (2000:3). To shorten the argument somewhat, if this is right, then no amount of scientific research will help us explain leadership, or guide us in how we can enhance leadership qualities and skills. Goleman et al says something very similar "... the leader's way of seeing things has special weight, leaders 'manage meaning' for a group, offering a way to interpret, and to react emotionally to, a given situation ..." (2003:8).

This brings some fascinating philosophical and epistemological issues into the debate. For a start, we must accept that language is the only vehicle that transmits the information we have with which to make judgements, and that

therefore, leadership, like everything else, is subject to linguistic reconstruction and manipulation. Thus a shared view of a leader, for example the team's view of its boss, is the result of one interpretation gaining ground over others, and the leader will have had some measure of control over which interpretation that is and how that view has been transmitted. If an organisation says that its leadership has overcome some dire crisis or another, how are we to know the truth of the statement? How are we to judge the veracity of any such statement? But it will affect how we subjectively assess, and rate, the organisation and its leadership.

If I were to push this illustration further it would raise the issue of relativism; how can we ever know what is 'true' if we have no objective basis for establishing truth? It also raises some postmodernist arguments about leaders and followers being "... 'constructions' that originate in the eye of the observer ..." and leads to the situation that "... leaders are neither permitted to take credit nor held responsible for catastrophes ..." (Rosenau 1992:139 and 33; although one might argue that leaders will quite often take credit for success but also not be held responsible for failure). Of course, a large number of those writing on leadership, particularly those using positivistic, statistical approaches, will reject this position, and it is not necessary to take this line to the postmodern extreme (a brief but illuminating discussion on this is at Chemers and Ayman (1993:325-327)). But my reflexive stance must by definition admit this line of thinking in considering the research data.

I have now arrived at the point where I am going to draw a line under the academic literature whilst acknowledging that some aspects of leadership have not been adequately discussed, for example, Zalesnik, who was important in distinguishing between leaders and managers (Zalesnik 1977/1992); women and leadership, which is a crucial dimension for organisations, including the civil service, where so few women rise to senior leadership positions (see Bass and Avolio (1997), Calas and Smircich (1997), Cm 4310, Rosener (1997), and Smith

(1997), for example); Fineman on emotion (Fineman 2000), Kets de Vries (19993) on emotional intelligence, and Clegg (1990) and Wilson (1992) on trust).

I expect some of these to come to the fore during the discussion in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 on the research evidence.

Relevance to the civil service – corporate documentation

One of the themes of this research is the importance of relating theory to professional practice. In this case, having investigated the academic literature, I will now turn to the corporate literature, and then see what both sources tell us about leadership in the civil service.

I am going to look at, and then compare and contrast, three corporate sources of information on leadership. First is the Department's own competency guide; second is the Permanent Secretary's led report on Civil Service reform; and third the Government's Performance and Innovation Unit's report on leadership which has already been referred to in this chapter. My aim is to see whether there is a coherent emergent discourse that could help the research; or perhaps even a model of leadership that I might expect to be prevalent amongst senior civil servants.

The competence guide

My first source is an internal Departmental document which was current up to March 2006, and thus while the research has taken place. There are several references to leadership in the DfES and the civil service generally which might help us begin to pin down what the term might mean in those organisations, or at least how it is applied or measured. The DfES "Competency Guide" sets out five competencies for staff which "... describe how we should do our job and how we should achieve our outputs rather than what the tasks or outputs themselves

actually are. They are a set of working behaviours ..." (DfES 2001). For the first time, the Department set general competencies, rather than different competencies for different grades. The fifth of the five competencies is called Leading and Managing Others, and it is worth setting it out in full. The definition given is

"you get the best out of people by giving clear direction, offering support and encouragement, treating everyone fairly and valuing diversity"

and the competency indicators are:

- you have long term work goals and clear plans and you communicate these effectively
- you delegate appropriately to individuals or groups, enabling people to take responsibility for their work and giving feedback when necessary
- you recognise positive contributions and ideas, and help people to learn from mistakes rather than blaming them
- you foresee and manage risks and consequences, and help others do the same
- you encourage motivate and support people from all backgrounds, and those with alternative ways of working (making reasonable adjustments when necessary)
- you take decisions, involving others as appropriate, and explaining clearly and sensitively why contentious decisions have been made
- you are trained in, and use, the Performance Management System to manage staff, setting clear objectives, reviewing progress, and dealing promptly with poor performance and discipline problems
- you carry out your legal and organisational responsibilities for the health and safety of staff, and equal opportunities, and encourage a balance between work and life outside work

- you listen to feedback and act on it, continuing to develop your leadership and management skills and techniques.

This list is backed up by examples of good and bad behaviour and two brief case studies.

The Department is clear we are dealing here with behaviours rather than personality, that leadership is about vision, direction and support, and that there is a moral or ethical dimension. It is also fairly clear that leadership is about what the leader does to help others achieve outcomes as well as achieving goals themselves. The concept of feedback is also important, but the leader apparent passively listens to it and acts on it, rather than actively seeking it (see Palmer (1974), Washbush and Clements (1999), and de Geus (1999) on the value of feedback and Argyris (1991) on the difficulty of getting accurate feedback). But the word 'team' isn't used, which is surprising because the whole of the Department's workforce is based on hierarchical teams, Divisions and Directorates. Of course, the competency as defined is about leading and managing, so confusion between those roles is a complicating factor.

Civil service reform report

The DfES competency guide is not the only textual source from which we may understand better what is meant by the term leadership in the civil service. My second source is a civil service wide reform package. In autumn 1999, the permanent heads of the main civil service departments met under the chairmanship of Sir Richard Wilson, the then head of the civil service, to discuss this agenda of civil service reform. Their report was sent to the Prime Minister, and published on 15 December 1999 (and can be found on the Cabinet Office website, www.cabinet-office.gov.uk). The report focused on six key themes

- leadership

- business planning
- performance management
- diversity
- a more open service which brings on talent, and
- making the civil service a better place to work.

Leadership was the first theme, both in importance and in order, now expanded into the phrase “stronger leadership with a clear sense of purpose”. Wilson went on

“all studies of successful organisations show that strong leadership is essential to achieve change. We need leaders at all levels, but particularly at the top, who are actively committed to transforming their organisations, have a clear sense of direction, purpose and values, and inspire and motivate those they work with” (Wilson 1999:2).

His description of what this meant went on to include the introduction of civil service-wide vision and values; the definition of leadership qualities and competencies and the use of these in recruitment, training and promotion; self-awareness as a key criterion for good leadership; and corporate leadership for the civil service as a whole. It is, perhaps, not surprising that Wilson would say that strong leadership is necessary to effect change. There is, as we have seen, plenty of literature to suggest this, albeit sometimes in conflicting stories. But what exactly is he getting at? There is little here to show that Wilson and the other permanent secretaries had in mind a truly radical change despite the rhetoric. But does his use of the word “transforming” imply the need for transformational leadership?

Back in the DfES, Sir Michael Bichard, then Permanent Secretary, said leadership would “... feature more strongly ... in recruitment and promotion”. In a speech to staff he said “teams produce better solutions more often than individuals. But

effective teams require people to be flexible and they need leaders who provide a sense of purpose and direction without seeking always to impose their will" (Bichard 1999).

So this strand of thought provokes the notion that leadership is about purpose, change, direction, and values and about motivating sub-ordinates (I presume the phrase "... those they work with ..." used by Richard Wilson can be equated with "sub-ordinates" in the general case. There is a degree of political correctness about the terms used for one's co-workers that gets in the way of clarity, but the notion of someone acting in a leadership capacity with a more senior colleague, for any significant period, is not an easy one to imagine in the civil service. The hierarchical and team structure itself imposes both a way of working with, and limits access to, others). Bichard's contribution brings in teams, flexibility and the notion that the leader should not always lead.

The Government's Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) report

A third source is the government report "Strengthening Leadership" (PIU 2000). The report is important because it was written by an amalgam of fast stream civil servants and outside appointees acting as a project team for that purpose; but it doesn't necessarily represent government policy and its recommendations may or may not be adopted.

Much of the report will be relevant to this research, but, although the team interviewed a wide selection of senior people, it is a report on what leadership is or should be, not about how civil servants or others understand, and make sense of, leadership. So it starts from a different position. I am more concerned with how senior civil servants understand the concept and how it effects day to day work. The report reflects the confusion identified above by falling into the classic trap of saying on the one hand "... leadership theory is riven by conflicting interpretations ..." and "... leaders themselves do not understand the reasons for their

effectiveness ..." and on the other "... action should include ... more vigorous approaches to recruitment and selection ... [and] more intensive development of leaders ... drawing on best practice ..." (PIU 2000: paras 3 and 4). It is hard to see how, on the basis of conflict and lack of understanding, recruitment and selection can be rigorous enough to reach any agreed corporate goal. The actions demanded, clear and uncompromising as they are, appear to come from something other than an agreed model of leadership or anything that amounts to research in the report itself. To be fair, the report does say that for a better understanding of the leadership behaviours more work is necessary, but that rather humble tone is not typical of the authors' approach. And it doesn't stop the authors reaching their very focussed recommendations for action. A practitioner picking up the report might legitimately ask exactly what the model of leadership was, that the report recommended, and which informed this more vigorous approach to recruitment and selection.

In Chapter 3, the report sets out what the authors' believe are leadership behaviours in action, as follows:

- generating and hearing multiple perspectives
- "holding" situations of uncertainty
- managing boundaries effectively
- dissemination of information
- the articulation of organisational values
- recognising the legitimate roles of others
- negotiating effectively, and
- acting as if responsible for the overall outcome.

But these are a mixture of tasks and behaviours and it is not easy to read across from the PIU list to the other two sources we have looked at.

The report suggests how some aspects of the public sector environment place increased demands on the need for highly effective leadership. The factors they list are problem solving in cross-cutting issues such as social exclusion; pressure for seamless service across many agencies; greater involvement of private and voluntary sectors in delivering public services; pressure for continuous improvement and innovation; and more complex political and institutional architecture, including devolved administrations, regional bodies and the European Union. The report says "leaders are less able to manipulate the world through traditional 'command and control' methods. They need to collaborate more, manage change through others, and focus on customers whose problems may not be susceptible to solution by a single agency" (PIU 2000: paras 2.9/2.10).

Interestingly, the report sets out some reasons why leaders in the public service are constrained in ways that leaders in the private sector are not. Essentially these boil down to risk aversion in spending public money and to political accountability, but the report suggests that these two factors are not alone. They suggest there is a blame culture in the public sector; the results of successful leadership may be hard to see; there are multiple layers of control; leaders are not sufficiently challenged or held to account; and in some parts of the public sector, leadership is undervalued (PIU 2000: para 2.13/2.14).

Bringing the corporate documentation together - an emergent discourse?

This section brings together the three pieces of corporate documentation and attempts to synthesise them into one emergent discourse that I tentatively describe as "the corporate position on leadership". In doing this, I acknowledge that the Department itself has not done this and may not agree that the output should bear that label. So, putting the three sources together we can begin to construct an emergent discourse, not in order to seek a truth behind it, but to identify areas of commonality that might suggest lines of questioning for the

research interviews. Some of the words used by the three are summarised below; I have fallen to the temptation to include 'diversity' not from what Richard Wilson said but from his list of six key themes, since the report itself said that leadership was key to each of the themes.

DfES competency	Report to PM	PIU Report	Emergent discourse
Vision	Vision	Vision	Vision
Direction	Direction/Change/ Purpose	Mission	Goal orientation
Helping others	Values	Co-operative	Valuing people
Support	Teams	Adaptability	Team working
Feedback	Self awareness	Generating and hearing multiple perspectives	Reflexivity
Behaviour			Behaviour
Moral dimension	Diversity		Moral dimension
	Flexibility		Flexibility
	Motivation		Motivating others

Table 1: comparison of terms used in the context of 'leadership'

Whilst it is possible to level criticism at this simple assembly of data, the Department, or the Civil Service as a whole, has used these words, has said these things, and presumably stands by them. The assembly is not arbitrary. For example, I have worked with the DfES competency framework regularly, and its effectiveness as a practical tool has thus been frequently tested. The words I have selected in column one (DfES competency) and three (PIU Report) are from the documents themselves. Column two (Report to PM) is more problematic. Once

the fanfare of the report and the Departmental versions of it had blown through the office, we are left with the words on the page, and my interpretation of the author's intentions. The reader can judge for themselves the validity of the last column.

At this point we can begin to check back and see how this analysis fits with Northouse's analysis to see where that suggests this puts the civil service leadership approach. We can rule out the trait approach on the ground that the civil service line is clearly about behaviour rather than personality. And the same goes for the Leader-Member Exchange approach, given that it has the moral problem addressed above. It could, however, still help to explain the actions of individual leaders. Contingency theory is harder to deal with. I do not believe one can dismiss it out of hand solely because it focuses on the leader changing to fit the situation, but it doesn't deal with a leadership style or approach that can be applied at all easily to the civil service where, generally, postings are not made with an eye to picking leaders to deal with a particular contingency. Indeed, the PIU report suggests that adaptability is a prerequisite of an effective leader so that they can be successful in a variety of jobs (PIU 2000, p21), and presumably a variety of contingencies, but that then describes a desirable skill rather than a leadership style. As Rickard and Clark put it, this is an "it all depends" theory (2006:36).

That leaves the other five 'traditional' approaches. Knowing at once that this exercise will throw up as many new questions as old ones it helps deal with, let us see how well these five match up to the overall discourse we have developed. This is an exercise in exploration rather than an attempt to discover an unequivocal answer and the point is to suggest approaches for the research rather than to draw unequivocal conclusions.

	<u>Leadership approach</u>				
<u>Emergent discourse</u>	Style	Situational	Path-goal	Transformational	Team
Vision				Y	
Goal orientation	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Valuing people	Y	Y	Y	Y	
Team working	Y		Y		Y
Reflexivity					
Behaviour	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Moral dimension				Y	
Flexibility		Y	Y		Y
Motivating others	Y		Y	Y	

Note: Y – yes; good match with description in Northouse (1997)

empty space – unclear; either no match at all, or no evidence in Northouse

Table 2: comparison between emergent discourse and six leadership approaches

It is not entirely surprising that such a broad mix of components in the overall discourse has suggested a good match with most of the approaches in Northouse. But all the approaches by definition include goal orientation and behaviour, so by eliminating those elements the difference between the 'scores' for each is starker, and the raw data suggest that the path-goal and transformational approaches are nearest the overall discourse. Neither, however, explicitly includes reflexivity, although proponents of the approaches may say that reflexivity is assumed, and the same reply might deal with the other departures from the overall discourse.

We should note that Bass and Avolio (1997) and Smith (1997) suggest women are more successful than men at transformational leadership, and note that women are in a minority in senior civil service posts.

Pictures at an awayday

From time to time, Directorates in the Department organise away days for their staff. In July 2003, the 150 or so staff from the Directorate that provided the majority of the interviewees in this research came together to consider a number of issues including "the art of leadership". The word 'art' here refers to the use of the imagery of the abstract artist Wassily Kandinsky. Six groups of staff, of all grades, were asked to consider "... their expectations of their leaders and the characteristics they would like to see" (Pickering and Welsh 2003:20).

Before making their pictures, the groups were asked to make notes on the expectations and characteristics, and then, after completing their picture, to interpret it. It is interesting to look at these notes and interpretations from two points of view. First, is there a commonality across the six groups which could be said to amount to an all-staff view of leadership and, second, are there similarities between that view, if it exists, and the views expressed in the main research.

The groups approached their tasks in slightly different ways so it is important to look at the words they used. This is most easily done in a comparative table drawing out the similarities between the groups. The four headings are taken from the emergent discourse identified from corporate literature, and the group comments put where, in my judgement, they appear to fit best. The only editing of the notes is to cut out some duplication in group 1's comments, otherwise the words are the entire notes left by the groups.

	Vision and goal orientation	Valuing people, behaviour, moral dimension	Reflexivity, flexibility	Team working, motivating others
Group 1	Carrying everyone along towards a common purpose	Openness, listening, inclusive and approachable, reach everyone taking different routes and approaches	Scales fairness equilibrium balance, flexible and tactile	The leader is keeping his/her staff in order and looking after them
Group 2	Bold, illuminated	Inclusive, Sometimes sharp and incisive sometimes softer	Able to adapt their style to many different situations, connected to a wider world	
Group 3	Providing direction across a range of issues	Thrusting forward but embracing everyone and taking everyone with them, taking account of different views	Thinking about the whole picture	
Group 4	A rounded leader moving towards a goal	Approachable, no spiky characteristics, Sturdy – you know they are there when you need them		Needs to interact well with others
Group 5		A leader needs to be seen and needs to be able to listen		An effective leaders leads by working with his/her team
Group 6	Visionary, clear inspirational direction, taking us forward	Inclusiveness, leaving space and opportunity for others, Warm, embracing	Rootedness, making sense of chaos	

Table 3 – notes on leadership expectations and characteristics by six all grade staff groups.

This demonstrates a co-relation between the groups' notes and the emergent discourse. There are some gaps, and some of the text might be moved from one column to another because the meaning is ambiguous, but overall the fit is good.

In the interpretation of their pictures the groups were more eloquent, but, perhaps because they were now describing pictures rather than their own understanding the words are more poetic and less organisationally orientated. For example, group 1 talked about "... encouragement, creativity and free thought ..."; group 5's entire interpretation of their picture was "this painting says that in a frenetic world a rounded and stable leader brings order, progression and fulfilment" (Pickering and Welsh 2003). It would be stretching the data too far to say that those comments underline the fit we have with the emergent discourse, but they do not suggest the fit is wholly illusory.

Capability Reviews

After the research was completed, and during the writing up stage, the Civil Service instituted 'capability reviews' of each government department. The DfES was in the first wave. The reviews investigated three aspects of performance to "... identify the specific measures that are needed if central government departments are to play their part in enabling the UK to meet the considerable challenge of the future" (Cabinet Office 2006). The three aspects were leadership, strategy and delivery.

Leadership covered four areas, setting direction; igniting passion, pace and drive; taking responsibility for leading delivery and change; and building capacity. The indicators for each area showed that the emergent discourse still reflects the corporate narrative not just for DfES but, probably, for the civil service as a whole.

Conclusions ... leading to issues for research

So I now have some rich and varied pieces of context. First, Northouse's view of the whole field of mainstream leadership thinking, then the Department's and the Civil Service's position on it. Taking both together I constructed an emergent discourse and came to a tentative view of how the Department's position compares with the main lines in the academic literature.

The literature has a lot to say about leadership, some from a scientific, statistical perspective, some from a more interpretative tradition; no agreed definition of leadership appears, but some clear models emerge, for example the transformational model. But these models dip into and out of fashion (Rickards and Clark (2006:34-35) and Reicher et al (2005) put them into different eras) as they become and then lose their position as dominant narratives. It is clear that the DfES takes leadership seriously and embeds it as a key component of recruitment, selection, performance, and pay, and includes in it the notions of motivation, and equality of opportunity; it is clearly a question of behaviours rather than personality.

This analysis suggests that at this stage the transformational and path-goal leadership approaches are the ones that fit best with the emergent discourse in the DfES, but there are other important points to consider, including emotion, emotional intelligence, discourse ethics, the constitutive approach and gender. This then provides a background from which I can consider the 'hunches' I have about leadership in the civil service and thus the questions I should ask in the interviews.

The hunches I had from this were, first, that leadership characteristics whatever they were would apply equally in all organisations but that the emphasis in the Civil Service might have changed over the years. There seemed little reason to believe the civil service was unique in its leadership requirements. Second, that

leaders are made not born, so training would be an important part of building a leadership cadre. Third, the interface with Ministers might complicate matters and the role of leadership in that context might be less clear and more problematic.

That then gave me a basis for my interview questions (see Annex) which would generate the data to support or reject the hunches, and lead to a better understanding of leadership.

CHAPTER 4

LEADERSHIP AS A SKILL

Introduction

In the last chapter we saw how an analysis of the academic and corporate literature guided me to an emergent discourse on leadership which led to my hunches about the issues to discuss in interviews. This chapter is the first of three that discuss the interview data. As the chapter progresses, I will introduce new literature as new points emerge; this is an example of the hermeneutic spiral where new discoveries lead to further research and a gradual development of understanding.

The chapter looks at what civil servants understand by leadership as a skill. There is a vast literature on leadership which I have discussed briefly in Chapter 3. It is there that I look at issues concerning leadership as a phenomenon in itself. This chapter focuses on what civil servants themselves told me they understand by the term "leadership" in their professional context.

We will see that there is a commonly accepted concept of leadership which is not difficult to describe but it bears little relation to the academic models or emergent discourse from Chapter 3. The conclusions to be drawn from this will be discussed in Chapter 7.

One further point: I have entitled this chapter "Leadership as a Skill". Instead of "skill" I could have used the word "competence" or "capability", but my preference is to describe leadership as a skill that can be acquired or lost, and even when one has it, can be deployed usefully or not usefully. It is an attribute in the same way

as a skill at sport is an attribute. I think the word "skill" conveys that meaning better than "competence" or "capability".

What do civil servants understand by the term 'leadership'?

Each of the interviewees was asked early on in their interview, but not as the very first question, how they interpreted the term 'leadership' in their work. Given a very significant degree of shared experience and culture in work, a large overlap in definitions was expected from the majority of the interviewees who were career civil servants, but I found a consensus in all the interviewees including one who was a recent recruit from an outside organisation.

For example, Gareth, who was very senior in terms of experience and grade, put it this way

"It is something like giving a sense of direction. It is something about setting a personal example, I think, of the values you want to live (to be a bit pompous about it), and I think it is those two things actually, sense of direction, giving some values and, in that sense, being something of an exemplar."

I don't think many civil servants would now regard a reference to 'values you want to live' as pompous and it is interesting that Gareth didn't qualify his use of the word 'exemplar' in the same way. Indeed, a set of behaviours and values was adopted by the Department in 2002 (Shaw 2006:59) before the interview with Gareth took place. Perhaps he felt uncomfortable about them in some way. At the other end of the scale so far as experience as a civil servant is concerned was Rosalie, who joined the service, directly into a senior grade, from the voluntary sector. With less than 18 months as a civil servant, she offered this variant

"I think what I mean by leader would be one person or a key group of people who provide the vision of where you're going and then help us all along the way, ... give us the route map, motivates us along the way as individuals and as a team."

Others offered the same sort of thing. Paul said

"Leadership is to me about working to achieve clarity of vision and purpose in terms of the way the policy that we are trying to implement on behalf of the Government. I think its then about transmitting that clarity to the people who, within Government, have to implement that policy."

Catherine agreed but added a new dimension:

"It's about keeping people's motivation and commitment to the work when things get tough so that's about giving them time ... it's about 'did you have a good holiday' and not only that but making people feel good about themselves at work Leadership is an active thing, interacting with people and in each thing you do and say modelling the kind of leadership and vision that you want to get to."

This extends the concept in an important way by giving followers a role. It is not enough to lead, it seems, but also necessary to ensure that people feel good about it. It may be that the implied feedback loop is important to Catherine. This links to an interesting idea put forward by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) who suggest that managers become leaders by being recognised as doing mundane tasks. Their argument is that if a characteristic of leadership is the ability to listen, for example, then by making such a mundane event 'special', because it is a characteristic of leadership, then the distinction between managers and leaders is due only to how we conceptualise leadership. The 'extra-ordinarization' of the mundane by managers turns them into leaders. We must be careful not to associate being mundane with a lack of value. As Alvesson and Sveningsson say

"one important meaning of managers' listening is that it conveys a feeling of inclusion, participation and social significance" (2003).

Lydia brought culture into the mix without defining the term:

"I think it's very much about the shape and the culture that we have as a Department..."

and in addition to identifying priorities, establishing drive and focus, and delivering objectives, leadership is also

"... how we behave to each other, to the outside world, where we see what's important to us all ... our efforts and attention."

So this reinforces the outward looking part of leadership, and the behavioural aspects that Catherine introduced, but takes it a big step further by including "... the outside world..." which presumably includes the Department's external stakeholders and perhaps the public service notion of serving the community, or the broader concept of putting the customer first. Certainly the corporate documentation discussed in Chapter 3 would point in that direction.

But despite this considerable degree of consensus, each person added short riders or qualifications that brought their own understanding more to life. For example:

Martin: "leadership is much more about being a figurehead and being able to inspire and being able give a clear sense of direction ... Leaders are the ones who are prepared to speak up."

And:

Clare: "a very harassed leader is no leader."

These individual notes add a lot of colour: concepts such as 'figurehead', 'speaking up' and being 'harassed' are very evocative and place the generalised concept into a much more human landscape. Mark did something similar but, interestingly used more academic language:

"Ha ha ha ...oh that's an interesting question. I suppose it's about ... giving a sense of direction to the organisation – it's about transformational change – it's about taking a helicopter view of where the organisation is and where it should be going and how we're going to get there – it's about the vision thing I suppose really."

James raised an issue we will look at in more detail in Chapter 6, the extent to which the involvement of Ministers constrains the ability of civil servants to act as leaders. He said

"....we don't always set the agenda ... because that is a given from our political masters. Sometimes we do [act as leaders] because they will ask for advice on what to do in relation to a particular issue or a particular policy area: they'll say 'help' in effect and we do have the opportunity for blue skies thinking."

I asked James to give an example of that in action:

"... let's take the one that you're familiar with, Individual Learning Accounts, they came in with an overall agenda but they didn't come in with a blueprint – they came in with a..a..at best a map and so there was a lot of scope for creating the product, for creating a scheme that met the given objectives so there was scope there, but it's more limited than the entrepreneur who will set up...who will have an idea....a business concept who will develop it and set it up – it's more constrained but it is still there."

So in this example, the scope for civil servants to act as leaders is more uncertain - sometimes limited by ministers' policy decisions and sometimes not. And it's interesting that James uses the illustration of a 'map' to describe where ministers are; very similar to others' descriptions of the leadership role for civil servants. But he was sure there was a significant leadership role which Ministers delegated to, or left for, civil servants.

Lucy neatly brought the political and follower issues together. She said leadership for her was

"... I think it is about knowing and setting strategic direction and by that I mean I think being a civil service leader you need to work with your political masters of the day but you also need to help shape that agenda though knowing and being strategic in what it is you are doing, and being able to translate that vision to something meaningful for your own staff so they are able to take that in and deliver it ..."

And it wasn't just about communicating the vision either, but about interacting with staff and, again implicitly, getting feedback,

"... I think it is about having that strategic vision and then being able to translate that and make it real for your own staff so that they are enthused of the agenda as well and are able to deliver it."

We are getting a fuller picture now of the civil servant as leader; a vision or 'map' is essential although that might come from Ministers, then making that real for staff is important, and finally making sure staff are enthusiastic about the vision completes the circle. These concepts of leadership are pretty generalised and I wondered whether people believed a civil service leader was in some way different from, or distinct compared with, a leader in say the private sector. In other words,

were people telling me how they understood the term leadership in any context, or specifically in a civil service context. Lucy was very clear about this.

"I think that distinction is different between organisations not necessarily between the public and the private sector. I think it's about the culture of the organisation in which you work and the things that motivate people within that, which is different, and there are some stark differences between the public and the private sector but there may also be a lot of similarities".

Although all the interviewees dealt with private and voluntary sector leaders on a regular basis, only one had recently worked outside government. Rosalie was uncertain there were any material differences "I think a good leader is a good leader", but she did put her finger on one difference that we come back to in Chapter 6

"... if you were a really good leader it could be very frustrating if you just keep on getting Ministers coming in and changing things so may be you have to be ... flexible and more able to commit yourself to other people's visions ... [it] may be a slightly different kind of leadership".

But Lucy went on to explain that that didn't mean there was only one style of leadership that might be found in one organisation:

"... if the prevailing culture of an organisation is to lead, for example by – I don't think they go quite as far as leading by fear but, if you led through saying 'this is what I am going to do and you must follow me regardless' – and people find that acceptable in the organisation, that is a very different type of leadership [from] one which is extremely inclusive and I think therefore that as an individual your style of leadership is actually quite important to match the organisation with which you're working ...If an army person came into this department and thought that they could lead

through a sort of command and control they probably wouldn't be very successful. So I think it is about the culture of the organisation ..."

This of course is a dilemma discussed in the literature, is it the culture of the organisation or the culture of the leader that dictates matters (compare for example contingency leadership in Northouse (1997) where the leader has to fit the context, and constitutive leadership in Grint (2000) when the leader sets the context). But Lucy introduces a further complication. I asked her whether she thought that civil servants had to adapt their leadership styles to their organisation's culture in order to be effective:

"I think it depends where you are on leadership – my definition of leadership is not somebody who is at the top of the organisation and only that – however the person at the top of the organisation is probably more easily able to cause the organisation to change through their style of leadership. A leader at my level, if I behaved in an extremely different way I would probably be fighting more against the grain than if I was more senior because my sphere of influence is smaller so I think it is not quite as stark as saying you have to adapt in order to be successful in an organisation but I think you do have to be aware of what works in terms of leadership styles...".

So for Lucy an important consideration is your place in the organisation – the more senior the leader, the easier it is for that person to impose themselves on the organisation and not worry about going against the grain of existing organisational culture. A more junior person would have to aim for smaller, incremental, change to have anything like the same effect.

It seems appropriate to ask Lucy what sort of leadership culture she thought the Department for Education and Skills had:

"It is an interesting question ... I would say that we are very successful at managing crises ... so that in sort of concrete terms that means you can take a problem, you can think it through, you can make difficult decisions – quite often on very short time scales without all of the evidence behind you and be confident and give that confidence to others that that is the direction of travel to take ... on a more mundane level of leadership we're not quite so good because we're not so good at articulating what it is we want because if we were we probably wouldn't get to the crises ... so it would be easier to describe the leadership that we're not in the Department than describe the kind of leadership that we are."

I referred Lucy back to a management meeting we had both been in that morning. I suggested that when we talked about performance issues, everyone agreed there was an issue there but, because there was no crisis, there wasn't very much leadership in evidence amongst us.

Lucy: "No – so we all said yes isn't it interesting – no it's true. I think that is a challenge for us as a Department and it's also about the reward mechanisms that come from it – the Department rewards people who are in crisis situations, they...you know...the people that we quote as being successful are those that have managed through a particular problem, er qualifications crisis, the A level crisis last year, the school funding crisis, etc etc ... we don't reward people publicly about keeping policy on the go".

Is 'crisis' here close to or the same as 'complexity' or 'change'? Kotter distinguishes leadership and management by saying that "... management is about coping with complexity ... leadership ...is about coping with change" (Kotter 1990:37). He illustrates the difference by saying an army in peacetime is managed, an army in war is led. Certainly the crises Lucy describes are more akin to Kotter's definition of leadership. So is it self-evidently true that leadership in the civil service can only be seen at times of crisis? Quinn (2005) suggests that leaders are at the top of their game when they draw on their "... own fundamental

values and capabilities – operating in a frame of mind that is true to them, yet, paradoxically, not their normal state of being ...”. As Quinn puts it “... it’s the way we lead when we encounter a crisis and finally choose to move forward ...”. So if the civil service is led only in times of crisis (which is not something the data unequivocally suggests in true) we could turn to Quinn who sets out a way of moving oneself into “... the fundamental state of leadership ...”.

Lucy’s description of leader taking decisions without all the evidence being in, is close to Mintzberg’s (1990) description of a manager. So are we confusing leadership and managership or are they two sides of the same coin?

James and Ian were quite clear.

James: “there’s a difference between leadership and management as management is more a process I think.”

Ian: “I think that leadership itself can often be confused with management in a sense that if you manage things you think you are doing leadership but I think there must be a distinction between management and leadership and I suppose leadership in the end must revolve around taking people with you in a certain direction and you know persuading them, bringing them along, getting them to sign in to your vision of the way things should be done not just achieving a series of tasks, objectives, outputs so it’s that additional business of bringing a group of people along with you and actually achieving some objectives.”

However, it is not as easy as all that to disentangle the two terms. Some writers use them interchangeably (eg. Burnes 1996) whilst others say it depends on context (Kotter 1990). For example, in a book entitled “Harvard Business Review on Leadership” (1990) the first article, by Henry Mintzberg, is called “The Manager’s Job” and refers to leadership only very rarely. At the end of the article is a series of questions for ‘managers’ and third is about acting “... before the

information is in" and contrasting that with waiting so long that "... opportunities pass me by" (Mintzberg 1990: 33). In the same volume Zaleznik contrasts leaders who "... tolerate chaos and lack of structure and are thus prepared to keep answers in suspense, avoiding premature closure on important issues" with managers who "... seek order and control and are almost compulsively addicted to disposing of problems even before they understand their potential significance" (Zaleznik 1990:87).

Bennis and Nanus (1985:33) famously, if unhelpfully, assert that "managers do things right; leaders do the right things". This has the ring of a sound bite rather than a serious comment. According to Krantz and Gilmore (1990) early writers used the terms leaders and managers interchangeably. Pascale (1991:66) said "some leaders do manage, and some managers lead" and the argument "generates more heat than light". Well perhaps, but I'm not so sure.

Another distinction could be between leadership and supervision which Jago (1982) identifies. He characterises leadership as "influence of group members through interpersonal process without resort to the authority or power derived from an employment contract". He suggests that managers treat subordinates differently; some, "the trusted cadre" receive leadership, others, "the hired hands" receive supervision. Jago thus says that leaders are managers but that managers can also be supervisors. The 'trusted cadre' and 'hired hands' distinction echoes the Leader-Member Exchange leadership approach discussed in Chapter 3 with its moral and ethical issues.

Krantz and Gilmore (1990) assert that the distinction is much more important than one of emphasis and is not merely a conceptual differentiation. They maintain that to split leadership and management is "...a social defence..." which leads to the pre-eminence of one over the other, "both in concept and in practice". They characterise the distinction as between heroic leadership and managerialism, and say that to worship one is to marginalise and devalue the other. This prevents the

essential interaction between leadership and administration necessary for change and development. They go on to discuss how visionary leadership has become a tacit form of managerialism, with 'excellence' as a visionary mantra being transformed into a set of techniques and tools, the very lifeblood of managerialism. Thus inspired by 'excellence' managers are supposed to "come alive and overcome their inertia" (1990:197). However, the authors go on, this diminishes the appreciation by those in executive authority of genuine leadership which involves risk, uncertainty, contradiction and ambiguity. This is not to say that a leader and a manager must be the same person; Krantz and Gilmore (1990:189) say "mutual respect and authorisation of each other" is what is required.

Burnes (1996) notes the proliferation of definitions of the term 'leader' and then states with confidence that leadership theorists can be separated into three main groups, those who focus on characteristics and processes, or on the leader-follower situation, or on organisation context and climate (1996:346). Burnes uses the terms leader and manager interchangeably (see for example page 351 where the heading is "Leadership in action" but the text refers only to managers). He concludes that managers (ie leaders) must have and use "a wide range of skills and attributes depending on the situation and context" (1996:354). He says this 'Jekyll and Hyde' approach raises questions about how managers can use different leadership approaches in one part of an organisation and another in another part. He suggests the worst managers "may not be those who make poor choices; it may be those who fail to recognise that any choice exists at all" (1996:362).

It is clearly possible to make a differentiation between leaders and managers, but it seems likely that in real life the distinction will often be theoretical, albeit with obvious and unavoidable practical overtones (for example if the prevailing culture rewards leadership over managership). As Kets de Vries (1990:755) says it is necessary to understand the "effect underlying the action of leaders" and thus "getting away from the laboratory" and concentrating on "the observation of actual leaders", whoever they may be. So let us return to the day-to-day life.

I asked each interviewee whether they felt that the definition of leader in the civil service had changed over time. Gareth was clear that leadership as an identifiable competence it is a recent phenomenon. He said

"...[leadership] is a new idea in the context of the Civil Service ... 30 years ago ... [senior civil servants] would have said that their function was actually to support Ministers and Ministers were the leaders".

He added

"I think it has been a gradual shift ... shifting in a sense that the Fulton Report certainly included material which suggested that leadership was going to be a quality required of the Civil Servant of the future. The future then dated from about 1969 as I recall...".

However, others did not feel that a significant change in that respect had occurred; Lydia said

"... I think like so many things, once you have a label to put around a box then you can categorise something but I think the things I've been talking about have always existed".

Catherine agreed but added

"...some of the things we had in the system like the blatant sexism and racism is gradually being ground out..."

so there had been changes of some significance, but they might have occurred anyway.

Can anyone be a leader? Well, almost everyone? The consensus here was striking but not unexpected. Most civil servants have staff management responsibilities so one would expect them to be described, casually, as leaders. In that sense everyone agreed. Gareth summed up the position,

"...I think it applies to everybody, well it doesn't apply to an administrative assistant as there is no one for them to lead really. But above that level it can apply at any grade, it is the situation that matters not the grade."

In his subsequent comments Gareth made it clear that by 'situation' he meant line management responsibilities which arguably doesn't necessarily equate with leadership at all.

Clare started in the same vein but linked their line management responsibilities to her own:

"Some of them certainly have a leadership role – yes – I mean – I don't want to get hierarchical about it you know, the Senior Executive Officers on the team certainly have a leadership role; they have their own line management responsibilities that are, you know, well, for want of a better word are given to them by me ..."

But she developed the point to include upwards as well as downwards hierarchical roles,

"...to some extent there is upwards leadership if you like – a responsibility for me and others to point out to our superiors actually we think we're on the wrong path here or actually we're not very clear where we're going you need to do more to give us that better sense of direction ..."

and closed the circle by describing how, in fact, everyone has a leadership role to play

"... leadership is probably – or to me anyway – both about being in the front – taking a lead, but at the same time being supportive and that implies both being in front and being behind as well, and I think the truth of the matter is that there are a number of different channels that our policy objectives

and aims need to take and one individual simply can't be in those channels at all times and that's where one starts to delegate and say well, you lead on that bit and I will lead on this bit and we'll meet up at a point further down the track".

But if we look carefully at what Clare is saying we can see that she is really describing a situation in which she as the leader, I think, is delegating authority because she cannot be in two places at once. That doesn't seem to me to be the same as saying that everyone automatically has a leadership function to perform.

Whether or not leadership is exercised by all, James had an important point to make about the differences expected from people at different levels.

"... certainly from the experience that I've had when I've done that job – I would not want to be a [Deputy Director] to save my life because I think the hassle factor goes up about 10 fold and the recognition factor is zip and the organisation treats them like dirt. The only reason why you would want to do that job is on the way to something else to be honest with you, because there isn't the recognition there, there isn't the authority there that you think below that level you're going to have."

Paul made the point that even if leadership is exercised by all, it is not formally recognised. He said

"...I don't think the performance appraisal system recognises this. When it looks at management and leadership it looks at all the technical aspects of management and doesn't look at the leadership role."

Initial Impressions

Overall, then, people saw leadership as being made up of two main components, a vision or big picture, and motivating others, including setting and living values. We

will see that this fairly straightforward model becomes considerably more complicated as we discuss how leadership manifests itself in the workplace. For example, who in fact sets the vision is by no means a simple issue. Each of the components can be broken down into important sub-elements, but the way these sub-elements were described was less exact, more emotional and more subjective. And people began to express their ideas in terms of what didn't happen or at least what didn't always happen well. This contrasted sharply with the high level model which was about being an exemplar or role model and was consistently described in positive terms. The sub-elements contained a number of actual or potential tensions and for some (Rosalie in particular) exposed a lack of training or understanding, or contrasted strongly with previous experience.

These two main components of leadership read across well, perhaps not surprisingly, to the Department's framework that sets out the competencies that are expected of civil servants in the Department. So vision reads across to "strategy", motivating others to "working with others", and values to "behaviours". The question is how much of this can be put down to common sense or good practice anyway, which one might find in any organisation, and how much is a reflection of the culture the Department has sought to instil in staff over the years. And, of course, how does this play out in the day-to-day setting and what does leadership mean in the professional world.

Vision

The first main component is 'vision'; what does the evidence say about this? 'Vision' was expressed in a number of ways, Rosalie's metaphorical journey complete with map (but no explicit destination), and Lydia's 'priorities', which uses a more jargonistic way of saying much the same thing. But it was there for all interviewees and was an important part of leadership for them. So what is 'vision' and where does it come from?

In the earlier part of this chapter we have heard quite a lot about 'vision'. Andrew defined his view very clearly:

"... it is a business process which then generates a sense of purpose, a set of decisions about what you are about to achieve, an understanding why you're trying to achieve them and all of those for me are components of a vision – what is that better place that you're trying to get to – that process is the one that leads you to a common understanding of that better place."

Interestingly, Andrew refers to this as a "process" rather than as something that arrives by, or evolves through, original thinking, and a "business process" at that. I then asked Andrew how, if it is a business process, he could know whether his vision was 'right'.

Andrew: "I don't. A vision cannot be objectively demonstrable if it were just that, it would need data and you need the management information, you need the trajectories, you need the targets, you need the MI but none of that will give you a vision – it's a way of knowing you're secure in the effect that you want it to have, but it can't in itself tell you if that's the right effect to be prioritising and trying to bring out, so there comes a point at which with the best information in the world you still have to make that further step of believing that amongst the whole range of things that I could do and our group could do – this is the one that we should really be focussing on."

This is really interesting. Andrew brings in management information, trajectories and targets, all key civil service process tools, but in the end relies more on intuition and belief than on quantitative data. This is at odds with his earlier assertion that vision is a business process. But it brings his definition closer to one which contains more than a hint that vision needs an emotional (but not necessarily irrational) component to lift it from being only a process to something that is motivational and leads to significant change.

Others also suggest that vision is more than a process. Mark looked back and told me

"I think that the area of work that I've picked up – God it's nearly three years ago, it's frightening...ha ha ha....good grief – was not in good shape when I took it over and so I think there is some satisfaction in starting to see it moving you know moving in the right direction, attracting the right kind of people in getting things moving in the right way."

Using different language, he also talks about 'satisfaction' and 'the right way' which could be integrated in either quantitative, process terms or in qualitative, emotional terms. Perhaps he used those words in order to include both interpretations.

So where does this vision come from? It was at this point in some interviews that the actual or potential confusion about the leadership role of ministers became important and this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, but it is relevant here as well.

Vision could come from a number of places, Ministers, senior civil servants, oneself, or, looking outwardly, the Prime Minister, the Government, or public opinion. But overwhelmingly, for civil servants, the role of minister in setting the vision was key. This leads to some difficulties.

Since such a vision is inevitably a political vision (sometime with a capital P, sometimes not), it is prey to changes that come from the political process as well as the normal pressures on any vision, for example, ministerial reshuffles and election results, which means that a civil servant hasn't got the same comparative clarity over the purpose and longevity of a vision that might be expected in a commercial company, or a voluntary sector organisation's adherence to a moral or ethical position. As Rosalie put it dramatically

"[Ministers] just tend to float in and say we're going to go to X even if we were going to Y last time."

This can lead to another effect. Catherine said:

"It seems to be the way we do things around here that as a civil servant you don't get tied up into the work or the commitment to it; that's the Minister's job. But you are just there to manage a process and deliver a process on behalf of the Minister."

Now this is a stark picture: Minister as leader and civil servant as manager. It is not a picture that many of my respondents drew for me. Whilst the dividing line between Ministers and civil servants can be indistinct, the overwhelming balance of evidence said that civil servants had a real leadership role, Ministers notwithstanding (see Chapter 6).

James underlined that by describing how a leader might get things done:

"you've got to have somebody who has got a clear vision who can give purpose, coherence and direction and a lead but they have also got to have other qualities – they've got to have the ability to work the system they've actually got to know the system or systems that they work within."

Whilst that could apply in part to Ministers, clearly civil servants would have a much greater role here as the people who operate the systems day-to-day. It is civil servants who, as James put it, know:

"how to pull the right levers, how to get things done, it's not just sufficient to have the vision you've got to have the ability to put that vision or to get others to put that vision into work so you've got to know how to work the system."

Arguably this re-introduces the dilemma between what is leadership and what management which we have already discussed, but if that distinction is fudged, or unimportant and in real life then, so be it. Mark had the same notion in mind perhaps when he said

“so for me it’s about grasping an opportunity, running with a ball that was finally getting moving and er...not only is it about developing the ideas, it is about carrying the people with you isn’t it and helping everybody to see both internally and externally that this is an idea worth pursuing.”

So far this discussion has not challenged the notion that the vision has come from one place, one individual. Or perhaps from a small and distinct group of people, ministers for example, occupying a particular position. But Andrew put a different, more complex, idea to me.

“Well, there are two ways in which you could approach it – you could say that a vision is created by one individual within their own head picking out the influences that we’ve talked about but I think what’s actually happened, at least for us in this group, is that you then need to amalgamate those processes going on within each individual’s head and try to draw them together in a way that gives you a collective understanding and purpose which is more than some of it’s individual contributions ...”

Mark told me the same story:

“I think it’s quite interesting I suppose my own kind of style is I try to listen quite a lot to people who work for me and try and take their counsel before we make big decisions about things because they nearly always say that’s bloody ridiculous you couldn’t possibly get that to work – what are you talking about. But if you do it this way instead then it will work, won’t it, and I say well OK then – alright fine – why don’t we do it that way then instead – which not only buys their ownership of the whole thing but also

means you don't go off down silly directions which are going to end up in the mire."

This sounds more realistic to me. It is hard to imagine a vision that has suddenly manifested itself to one person with no other person or influence being involved. But, as Andrew went on to say

"... there's necessarily a process for drawing that vision together, they can't just drop out of a clear blue sky, but to exercise leadership then you'd have to ... lead the process of getting that vision and, I think I do mean lead not manage there, and make sure that it remains relevant and up to date."

Now this is a complete cycle and one that draws a distinction between leading and managing a vision. The vision is an amalgam made up from several, or many, sources, brought together by a leader and made relevant and up-to-date. Nevertheless, this rationalist view may in fact over-simplify the real world complications that apply day-to-day. Look at this exchange with Mark. I asked him where he thought the vision came from.

Mark: "Erm....I think it comes partly from the top of the organisation although I guess less from there than you might think in a way and partly I think it comes from particular ... well certainly it comes ... I mean the top of the Civil Service part of the organisation. Sometimes it comes from Ministers – sometimes it comes from particular individuals in quite powerful positions in the organisation"

I asked for an example.

Mark: "... in the case of the Skills Strategy I think in a way Ministers had identified there was a problem, there was a gap, there was a hole, there was a lack of coherence but it's taken someone like [name of a Director] to bring a sense of direction and clarity and purpose to that and a sharply

defined and clear way forward so I think that was quite a good example of leadership actually."

But even then Mark considered whether the reality wasn't more complex. Having identified ministers and the top of the civil service as the source of the vision; then named a single person; Mark then agreed with Andrew.

Mark: "partly it's a collective effort working these ideas up and being a sense of involvement in the collective effort but partly it's about your own individual ideas and feeding those in and starting to build a whole from a number of parts ... I don't think it is just one person actually that creates a vision I mean I think there is leadership actually at all levels in the organisation"

Motivating others and setting and living values

The second of the key components in my interviewee's interpretation of leadership is motivating others and setting and living values. This was a theme in all the interviews but from Gareth's point of view a comparatively new one.

"So it is a new idea I think for most senior managers in the Civil Service but clearly an increasingly important one as people see their role as being about motivating people to [obtain] better delivery [of our objectives]."

Delivery has become a familiar term in the civil service. As Ian put it

"in the last 20 years again there's been a move to become ever more business like and more focussed on outputs rather than the processes,"

and this has led to change in the way people work.

Ian: "the climate in the last few years has been much more open to allowing people to operate more independently but based on you know a clear set of what outputs we need to achieve."

Everyone in one way or another referred to the importance for a leader of motivating their staff. Clare put it this way

"it's having the time – having time to listen to people, knowing what drives them, knowing what inspires them, yes – and each one is different ... I just think it's really important not just to be seen but to be seen to have the time and to care."

Whereas Catherine said

"it's about keeping people's motivation and commitment to the work when things get tough so that's about giving them time which is not about producing [work] but it's about 'did you have a good holiday?' and not only that but making people feel good about themselves at work."

This is an interesting perspective because it seems to be at odds with Catherine's earlier comment that "...as a civil servant you don't get tied up into the work or the commitment to it; that's the Minister's job". So what is the "commitment to work"? Is there something that transcends day-to-day work to which commitment is necessary? Is Catherine thinking about some sort of public service ethic, perhaps, which gives staff an important motivating factor that remains constant as ministers and their policies change? Or is it just good leadership or management practice to associate the day-to-day mundane with a bigger vision to which commitment is necessary, that would apply whatever the work?

If you don't have this link you risk ending up with a workforce detached from the vision, and there is a danger that work is now no more than a management process, which Catherine also referred to

"it's just about doing a job, so that civil servants are allowed to remove themselves from the work. It's not me guv, it's just a job. So when something goes wrong nobody feels it personally 'cos it was just another job that they were asked to do."

This is a very powerful message. Put simply, if the interface between ministers and officials disengages civil servants from ownership of ministers' policies, then it seems that any leadership performed by civil servants is not leadership of policy in a wide sense but only a narrower if important version, leadership of people. Catherine's comments also imply that this alienation could be a defensive strategy which is a point discussed by Krantz and Gilmore (1990) that we have looked at earlier in this chapter.

Some will argue that that is a over-reaction. The relationship is, it is true, unusual, and demands a flexibility that some working in commercial organisations would not require. But since ministers cannot deliver policies on their own, and, in fact, spend long hours worrying about completely different matters (such as elections), the policy leadership role for civil servants not only exists, but is a clear role (see Chapter 6).

Clare raised the stakes by moving from motivating staff to inspiring them.

"Leadership...erm...in the Civil Service context...erm....ggrrrrr ha ha ha. Help! Ha ha ha. Er I think leadership is about ...it's about inspiring people really – on a day to day basis. I suppose leadership strictly wouldn't involve doing it every day but in the Civil Service it definitely does, so inspiring people, setting the direction, keeping morale raised, you know keeping that inspiration there even when things are going badly wrong."

A similar perspective on motivation is provided by Rosalie who, developing her journey analogy (you remember her route map?), said

"... a good leader should be at the front showing the way and sometimes rushing to the back to make sure that all the stragglers are caught up."

And others echoed the point. Martin for example said:

"I think what you're trying to do as a leader is to exercise that personal power to inspire people, you know, tread the path that you want to and that'sthat is different I think from ... simply instructing people to do something because I am their boss and I've got that position power."

But this is fine in team of 8-10 people or Divisions of 20-30, but what about on a larger scale? As Clare put it

"... with 250 people you couldn't have a day to day relationship with every single one of them – you just couldn't do that could you – you would have to do the royal sort of visits and so on. There are things you can do that show you're open aren't there, I mean it's the way you respond when people want to see you but then again I haven't actually tried this with [former Director General] but my feeling would be that if I rang them and said that I really want to come and have a chat with you, I could."

When it comes to the Permanent Secretary with several thousand staff, Lydia recognised that the leadership signals counted for a lot:

"... it's about how visible he makes himself and it's about how well he communicates with us as a management team and with the Department as a whole. It's about how, I'm still talking about 'how' but what he is doing, what he is doing in terms of, I think it is primarily, it's the presence he brings to the organisation, the communications, the level of visibility he has, the level of enthusiasm too to some extent and certainly on a face-to-face, day-to-day basis, a lot of it is about the extent to which he is enthusiastic or appears to be bored by issues that sends out quite a lot of signals about his leadership style and what he wants to see happen when in the organisation."

Mark developed the point in an interesting way, bringing into the discussion, again, the notion that leadership in times of crisis is not the same as leadership in times of calm (see Kotter 1990):

"Erm....I was talking to some people on a course about this recently actually and I was saying that I suppose leadership is rather visible isn't it when a time of chaotic massive change or crisis, and you absolutely need to have people then who can grasp and grab a situation and get it under control – redirect it – have the power in the personal presence – power to drive things through and cut through the crap, and to sort stuff out, but I think I was saying to them that I think that's only ... one aspect of leadership and there's another side of leadership which is the sort of quietly chiselling away with people every day helping just to....it's the coaching bit really which is helping people not to go offside or get fed up when they can't quite see where it's going or to just give them a nudge a bit in a slightly different direction so that they keep on track"

So leadership as a practical concern is multidimensional and changes from time to time, from change or crisis, to everyday coaching.

What characteristics are needed in a motivational leader who may have to inspire staff? Lucy suggested that part of it could be innate:

"I actually think that there are some people who are better leaders than others from the start, they have whatever those natural abilities are and they are the ones that are more likely to succeed ..."

but that didn't exclude others from success as leaders

"... I think others can learn to emulate them in the right context"

Lucy was quick to dismiss the idea that being a leader was a matter of ticking the right boxes in a formal list, and for her motivational skills were key, but not the only characteristic,

“... a leader is someone who leads and therefore people will have to wish to follow and so to me motivation is absolutely critical... others will show confidence by having the power of their convictions in terms of dealing with others ... There are people who naturally motivate others simply by the charisma that they’ve got and there are others of us who just have to learn what other things work.”

How then is this motivational effect to be carried forward? Would the vision be strong enough to motivate staff if the leader was missing or is the leader’s role a critical foundation which needs never-ending attention? Andrew believed a vision would motivate but it would need effort:

“... one [way] is by insisting on [the vision’s] importance I think – it’s surprisingly easy in an organisation like this to focus on daily operations and lose the sense of purpose, so making it my personal business to ensure that we don’t lose that sense of importance, in common understanding, of what we are all trying to do [is important] ... the process is bringing together a collective understanding of purpose and that needs to be constantly refreshed, but at least for some undefined period so long as people have had proper engagement with ...[the] vision ... then it can carry on for a period remaining valid as a sort of lode star which guides people’s actions, so you should be able to take any leader out of the organisation for a while and if the vision is strong enough and if it is sufficiently broadly owned it wouldn’t matter.”

This could be a test of a vision’s validity, robustness and ownership; by seeing whether the vision operates without a leader (or the most senior leader) actively promoting it, one could judge its effectiveness. But perhaps it is not a test an

organisation would be happy to try since the cost of failure could be high. But is a vision worthwhile if it failed this test?

Some, in particular Paul, made a point of talking about the importance of motivating people outside the Department

"I think the other aspect to me of leadership is the public facing role in which one is seeking to establish effective networks with key stakeholders outside immediate Government circles, both to understand their key priorities, key issues and concerns and to look to achieve a, if you like, a situation where Government policy can be implemented to mutual benefit so that we can achieve the Government's goals but in doing so we achieve the buy in of key stakeholders because we help them in achieving their goals."

That requires different skills; as Martin put it:

"... but that is actually quite difficult when you've got to work with external organisations when you don't have any position power – you've actually got to persuade them ... you know, for people who are not part of my team, or not perhaps even part of this Department. You know, we work quite closely with people in the LSC and from the DTI and DWP¹ and they need I think to have a pretty good understanding of the general direction that we want to take and why we want to take it – it comes back to the 'lader' idea doesn't it about showing people the path and leading them towards the kind of performance that we are trying to achieve and the policy objectives that we are working to."

How does this work in a structured bureaucracy such as the civil service? Part of the challenge is to maximise the effectiveness of the resources available. In any organisation one doesn't have a completely free hand with selecting staff. Usually

¹ LSC is the Learning and Skills Council, DTI is the Department of Trade and Industry and DWP is the Department for Work and Pensions

one inherits staff and the role of the leader is to maximise the benefit to be obtained. As James put it:

"we don't have, and that is one of the constraints in the Civil Service, the ability to pick in quite the same way, our people and say I want you and I want you to do that and I want you to that. We have to some degree take what's given and that's a constraint on effectiveness."

But if the opportunity arises to choose staff then:

"... you've got to have the ability to pick the right people to work for you and to give them the authority and the responsibility to get on with it"

Ian was keen to suggest that the structure was flexible enough to allow a leader to use resources effectively:

"we don't necessarily want this sort of pyramid centralised structure in terms of how we deliver things; [such as] formal teams ... [there is an] expectation ... [of] much more fluidity in an organisation structure which again gives people with...there's more scope for you as a leader to use different people's skills at different times in order to achieve your vision in not such a traditional sort of team structured way."

He suggested this change has been boosted by an influx of non-civil servants:

"we've brought in a lot of external people you know, non Civil Servants, ... who aren't so fussed about you know following Civil Service traditions ... there's certainly more acceptance that people should be given more space to operate in a way that they do."

This has led, he said, to a significant change in the Department's culture:

"I think there's much more acceptance that people can you know organise themselves in different ways and move us...recent moves and to sort of matrix management and project management and symptoms of that."

And James gave me a practical example of where that flexibility would make a real difference:

"I think you would try and adapt your own style to differing circumstances yes – but knowing that I'm not personally particularly good at some types of tasks it would be more important to gather round the right people who've got that expertise who could help you."

However, Lucy looked at it from the point of view of the follower and for her the structure looked pretty formalised:

"I think it is about the confidence others have in them and this is part of the hierarchy. If you see somebody that the hierarchy values you will probably follow them because you think that's what the organisation wants so I think there is something in that – that if you have a particular individual who is always being called to senior level meetings to give their point of view or Minister's asking their views then you probably are going to follow them because you assume that others think that they are good."

This developed into a more detailed discussion about how followers recognise who to follow, and thus how followers confer a form of leadership status on those with apparent power.

"This is conferred power I think that I am describing. The power is somewhere else but the – I am talking to you much in the abstract – I won't give names but.... If you have a Grade 3 that trusts a Grade 5 to do something and that Grade 5 is always being asked to go with a Grade 3 to meetings – the power is being converted to the Grade 5 but the people sitting behind it will see the Grade 5 as being asked to go to the meetings so you assume that there is something in the way in which they are working

which is right ... as an individual I would probably be more attracted to go and work for somebody like that because, I think you're right, that the power is there but it is conferred power, it is not the absolute power because the absolute power in that instance would be with the Grade 3."

Maccaby (2004) points out that followers are necessary to leaders (can you be a leader without followers?) and that the motivation of followers is therefore important. Is Lucy here motivated by what Maccaby describes as rational motivation, "... money, status, power ..." or are more subtle issues at play, irrational factors "... motivations arise from powerful images and emotions in our unconscious that we project onto our relations with leaders ...".

If Maccaby is right that this 'irrational' transference, if positive, will make us "... see their leader as better than [they really are] – smarter, nicer and more charismatic ..." this could then lead to the emergence of myths about the leader which have no basis in reality, and the leaders themselves being seriously misled about their, to take an example of especial importance to the civil service, their ability to manage risk. Maccaby suggests the challenge in this is especially urgent given the pressing need for increasing diversity and therefore a "... move away from stereotyping and really understanding differences in personality and ways of thinking and learning" is important (Maccaby 2004).

Perhaps Kets de Vries' (1990) 'sage-fool' who creates "... a counter vailing power against the regressive forces inherent in leadership ..." is an important consideration. The fool has the ability to play the role of "... mediator between leaders and followers, [bringing] to the surface certain conflictual themes and thereby allows both parties to deal with the issues at hand." It is not easy to see how the civil service could appoint 'sage-fools' but perhaps it is a skill required in an effective leader.

Rosalie picked up this theme and said

"... leaders need mavericks. We need that, we need challenges, we need people to.....you know, if you are coming up with a vision you need somebody to come along and say hang on a minute what about this ... I think having [mavericks] as leaders is really tricky because a maverick by nature is going to jump about and that's very hard if you're trying to following somebody doing that I think. People following need a sense of clarity and a sense of knowing where they're going ... leaders need mavericks but I don't think we need maverick leaders."

Rosalie is distinguishing the roles of leader and maverick which is awkward in practical terms if we are also saying that everyone is a leader. But in her prescription the maverick without leadership responsibilities does have room to challenge. Is such a role one of Johnson's (2000) "rebels without a cause" cast in the postmodern mould or is it an altogether more serious function designed to do more than merely unsettle?

Lucy: "I don't think that you have to be liked to be a leader. I think there are examples of leaders within this organisation who are people who, as individuals and their style of working may not be liked, but people follow."

Conclusions

All the interviewees thought that leadership had clear defining characteristics (vision etc.). The language was broad and sweeping but people resisted the notion that 'leadership' was clearly this thing and not that thing as if there were competing definitions from which they had to choose. There was no appetite for a box of rules one could pull down from off the shelf. Why was this? Is it because they felt comfortable with a rather vague but broadly understood view of leadership, or that no box of rules has ever been offered to them? Lucy certainly didn't like the idea of a tick box approach to leadership as a skill. But the idea of leadership appears to be well embedded in the Department's culture.

Indeed if there was no pre-existing understanding of the meaning of the term, how could this research have made progress? No-one asked me what I meant by 'leadership' perhaps because it didn't occur to them to do so. So is there already a shared meaning; a benchmark against which everyone would agree how leadership as a practical concern, stands up? As we have seen, there are any number of ways of defining the term, although they are not all mutually exclusive. So have we a Humpty Dumpty issue?

'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master – that's all.'
(Carol 1993:75)

It seems on this evidence that people do have an internalised understanding that can be applied in day-to-day situations, and which is sufficiently shared to permit this meaning to be common in the organisation. Humpty Dumpty's cavalier approach is fine in Looking Glass land but not much use in practical situations. As Belsey (2002:2) puts it "meaning is not at our disposal or we could never communicate with others."

So what was this view of leadership made up of? The twin ideas of giving direction and living values were widely shared and were then defined in terms of 'vision' and 'motivation'. There was no consensus that leadership in the civil service was markedly different to leadership anywhere else (except for the Ministerial angle covered in Chapter 6), but the notion that leadership was

commonly recognised in crisis situations led to a debate about whether leadership was shown only in crisis.

There was a consensus that leadership could be displayed by all grades and was not restricted to the upper echelons: but no clear view as to whether the lack of clear distinction between leadership and managership was real, or an issue. This may be an area where the literature could help the civil service explore the issues, although it doesn't seem to be pressing.

Vision was about bringing ideas from several sources into a coherent, and collectively owned, picture that would engage the staff and deliver results that could be monitored, for example through management information. It was a complete cycle from idea to outcomes.

Motivating others was also about delivery, but it is achieved by recognising the individuality of the staff working on the vision. Whether all had the necessary skills seemed uncertain, and the idea of testing the vision's robustness by removing the leader to see if motivation held up, may be going too far. But that remains a conceptual check that might be applied. There was also quite a lot about how working practices could be improved in order to make motivation move certain: eg by working flexibly. And a particular favourite of mine, because of the postmodern connotations, is the need to challenge leaders. Could we really install a Kets de Vries (1990) "sage-fool"?

We will see in Chapter 7 how this comes together with the conclusions from the next two chapters.

CHAPTER 5

LEADERSHIP AND TRAINING

Introduction

As the government department with the responsibility for education and skills, the Department takes particular interest in training both for its own staff and for promoting training amongst other employers. Achieving and retaining Investors in People (IiP) status, which the Department did in 2005, is of enormous importance. There are centrally held budgets and locally held budgets for individual and group training; individual members of staff can access training using either the Department's own Learning Academy or external training providers. Senior managers demand quarterly data on volumes and benefits of staff training. These processes support a strong culture in favour of training, but tempered by an equally strong demand for value for money and the relevance of training to the job (but support for training linked mainly to personal development is also encouraged if the development is included in the learner's annual performance appraisal). Not surprisingly, given the Whitehall-wide emphasis on leadership in the public service, 'leadership and management training' is one of the areas where training is encouraged. Co-incidentally, as research for this thesis started, so the Department embarked on a formal Management and Leadership Programme (MLP) for senior grades. Taking part in this programme became mandatory soon after my interviews started, but most of the interviewees had already started MLP and all had done some recent training in leadership issues.

This chapter seeks to establish whether senior civil servants believe leadership training is useful and why. After a brief discussion of the theory of teaching leadership the chapter discusses research data about training in general and then

looks in more detail at two aspects, can leadership be taught, and does leadership training have a positive emotional effect on people.

This builds on the last chapter. If leadership is a skill than presumably it can be taught, and, if the recipient is not positive, that teaching will fail.

Can leadership be taught – the theory

Instituting a combined 'Leadership and Management Programme' begs some questions. As we have already discussed, there is a debate about whether leadership and management are the same thing, or two different things that can be taught together; and, if they are different, should a programme dealing with them be aimed at the same client group. Many writers say they are different (see Chapter 4); Sadler (2003:171) agrees. But he goes further and says that "... leadership skills cannot be taught...", that "... it is important to distinguish between leadership programmes and leadership training courses..." (saying that the former is typically a series of events including mentoring and coaching and attendance at a development centre), and that "... in the majority of cases ... involvement in them is confined to so-called 'high flyers' ..." (Sadler 2003:177-8); is his reference to 'so-called high fliers' an indication of scepticism towards the kind of management Sadler believes makes these mistakes. To rub his point home, Sadler adds that "leadership training programmes have some serious flaws ... employers make the mistake of believing that training programmes will, by themselves, develop leaders" (Sadler 2003:179). Another view is that "... leadership development programmes are based on teaching people skills and knowledge ..." whereas a more productive line is to "... put the emphasis upon action and learning ..." (Pedler et al 2004: ix).

And should we be focussing on the individual at all? Pedler et al say "...leadership is best thought of not as an individual activity based on skill and competence, but as a practice or set of practices, carried out by and between people in work situations" (2004:12).

If it can be taught, it would seem to be common sense that effective leadership training would have a positive effect on the wellbeing of society. Burgoyne et al (2004) tested this proposition (in the sense of "management and leadership" which they aggregate (2004:13)) and found it does "... enhance performance for economic and social benefit" (p1), noting on the way, but dismissing, that Porter (2003) argues that the macro-economic perspective is dominant and that management capability is a consequence of other investment.

It is not intended here to explore in depth the concepts of organisational learning or a learning organisation or to discuss learning methods or styles. But "... definitions of learning focus on action as well as cognition ..." (Casey 2005) and it is worth looking at one aspect of the learning interaction, because it may help us understand why some institutional learning is resisted, through the writing of Paulo Friere.

The burden of Friere's position is that the teacher, the pedagogue, decides what should be learnt and the learner, the object, memorises it (Friere 1993:61 and Darwin et al 2002:137). This not only gives the teacher an unassailable position, a privileged position unearned by reference to the situation or the prevailing culture of learning, but it subjugates the learner to a position where they do not "... practice any act of cognition ..." since the learning is "... the property of the teacher..." (Friere 1993:61). Friere calls this the banking concept.

But he identifies an alternative, which he calls the problem-posing method, which does not dichotomise the activities of the teacher-student (now an hyphenated single word (at least in translation)). Now the learning is not the teacher's private property and the learners are always cognitive. Thus "... problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality ..." and "... the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality ..." (1999:62). Friere firmly concludes that this "... education as the practice of freedom ... denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people" (1999:62). As Darwin et al conclude "... Friere's aim is to free people from the domination of distorted communications

through the development of self-reflective understandings which allow them to participate in the social construction of new meanings..." (2002:138). This links learning to critical theory; learning as an act of freeing the subjugated from the hegemony of privileged teachers instructing in their own interest and not that of the students. It also fits well with a hermeneutic study which similarly involves peeling back the layer of understanding to get closer to a reality that lies beneath. If the students are senior civil servants their perceptions of the learning process at work on MLP will be important; is it the banking concept or the problem-posing method that is at work?

Fundamentally, there is no explicit distinction in the Department's MLP programme between leadership and management, although the opening paragraphs of the Department's note on the programme discuss leadership as the driver (DfES 2005a), and the programme is aimed at senior staff (new Directors, Divisional Managers and Team Leaders). But the MLP does have an assessment/development centre, coaching, learning sets and other events. A new initiative is the Introduction to Leadership Programmes (ILP) for more junior staff '... on the grounds that leadership occurs at all levels' (DfES 2005a). So the Department's objectives seem to meet Sadler's prescription, and, if Sadler is right, is doomed to failure – we will see next how the interviewees said it matched that in practice. In the hermeneutic tradition, we will start with an overview of peoples perceptions, then take a more detailed look at what they said, and then return to the overall position to see how that has been modified by the more detailed discussion.

Initial thoughts

There were mixed views about leadership training. Gareth had been on a week long leadership course just before MLP was set up. He said

"it was quite an interesting discussion of some of the theories around leadership; if you want me to recite any of them I'd be pushed ... what was more interesting was talking to people from a range of backgrounds which

included private sector people as well as public ... I think I took away one or two useful things."

This slightly aloof, perhaps sceptical, view, however, was tempered by his more positive view of less formal learning

"... it is much more potent to see somebody who is a good leader and learn from them ... than it is to go to any number of courses or reading a number of text books or dare I even say write a thesis on the subject. I learned far more from watching [Head of a Public Sector Agency], as a really superb leader in the Civil Service context than I would ever do from anything else."

Is Gareth saying this because he believes that formal learning on leadership is genuinely ineffective (has he, for example, a low regard for academic learning leading to scepticism of anything formal) or does he feel threatened by the new order, young pretenders who will all have been through the Department's MLP? James and Burgoyne (2001) warn against the 'cloning' problem, that is an organisation is "... in danger of unintentionally recreating the kind of leaders it already has..." whereas leadership development should be geared to creating new capabilities and a "... diversity of management is a key to unlocking this problem..." (James and Burgoyne 2001:2). And is his notion of a 'really superb leader' the same as the Department's especially bearing in mind the Prime Minister's programme of modernising the civil service? It is tempting to describe Gareth as of the old school, but that doesn't automatically mean his view is wrong or inappropriate.

Paul has a similar background to Gareth, although he was not as senior in rank or length of service, and although he expressed himself rather differently, I think one can see some of the same ideas coming through. He was brutally clear about MLP, which had just started before I interviewed him.

"... it was terribly technical and process orientated. I was going on something which was supposed to be about leadership as I understood it

and the first thing you do is an 'in tray' exercise. Now I am not sure that leading by 'in tray' is a new concept and may be there is a whole new book to be written around that but that to me is not leadership."

Paul chose to overlook, or didn't appreciate, the fact that the 'in tray' exercise was just the first step in a linked series of exercises which included analysis, policy determination, negotiation, coaching, dealing with Ministers and implementation. And the development centre, which is what Paul was talking about, was preceded by a 360 degree peer group assessment and two psychological tests; and then supported afterwards by one-to-one coaching, learning sets and ad hoc training modules. So why did Paul focus on just that one element? Was he looking for an excuse to be dismissive of MLP; or of all formal training?

Catherine, a manager with a lot of experience but only recently promoted to the Senior Civil Service, had not been on MLP, but had heard about it. She, too, was not enthusiastic, but she went a step further and said what for her was missing in the kind of formal learning she already undertaken:

"most of what I've been on doesn't do a lot for me because I feel like I am attending a year 6 class when I want to be in the year 12 class ... the top and bottom of [leadership] is [giving] time to ... people, ... that's what irritates me about most of the leadership stuff I've been on, to me leadership is ... communication and building relationships and building trust ... I don't understand why it's difficult."

This is a confident person talking, the sort of person who would be likely to volunteer for courses and take risks in choosing new and experimental ones. She has an impressive track record of helping disadvantaged groups outside work and may well have amassed a great deal of practical experience in organisation and decision making. So her reaction to the then embryonic MLP may have been atypical, but she said

"... the thing that's just come through [ie MLP] ... to send all Divisional Managers on this assessment centre for leadership, you know really does irritate because again you'll be sat there with people who you feel are talking a load of crap".

There is an interesting misunderstanding in this statement; MLP has, and makes a big virtue of having, a development centre at which personal strengths and weaknesses are explored and then discussed individually and privately with an external coach, not an assessment centre of the sort that one would 'pass' or 'fail'. If people think they are being assessed in the pass/fail sense they may be more apprehensive of MLP or any formal learning, less willing to approach it with an open mind, and more likely to assume that it won't be effective. But does Catherine consciously or unconsciously recognise Friere's 'banking concept' of learning and has chosen to attempt to side-step management's imposed agenda?

The MLP is clearly set up to develop staff and equip them to become more effective leaders and managers. This implies change through 'learning' and as Edgar H Schein says there is an inherent paradox surrounding learning " ... anxiety inhibits learning, but anxiety is also necessary if learning is going to happen at all..." (Coutu 2002). You can't talk people out of "learning anxiety" ("... being afraid to try something new ...") unless they are also experiencing "survival anxiety" ("... the horrible realisation that in order to make it, you're going to have to change..."). Schein says that "... if the employee accepts the need to learn, then the process can be greatly facilitated by good training, coaching, group support, feedback, positive incentives, and so on" (Coutu 2002). The DfES is undergoing considerable change, with staff cuts of around 30% and an organisational change to being more strategic and less a delivery vehicle. As a staff booklet puts it "... major changes in organisation and ways of working are necessary to enable the Department to fulfil these new roles successfully. We are already starting to make these changes, though we have more to do" (DfES 2005:7).

If Schein is right, the Department has decided (presumably, unconsciously) to raise the level of survival anxiety and may have – perhaps inevitably will have – failed to take everyone with them. “Psychological safety is ... dramatically missing when a company is downsizing...” (Coutu 2002) which is the situation the Department finds itself in.

Of course anxiety is part of leadership itself according to some writers. For example, Fiedler says “... it is meaningless to talk about leadership outside the situational context ...” and that “... the active ingredient ...” in the situation is the degree to which the situation “... causes uncertainty and stress and therefore anxiety ...” (Fiedler 1993:2).

But not everyone was as dismissive as those three interviewees. Rosalie, who had joined the Department from the voluntary sector only 18 months earlier, said

“... leadership training made me realise that I’d lost my confidence and so I found that very useful ... quite a lot of people need confidence building, particularly women. They can be leaders and they can be good at it and that is important.”

Rosalie had a recipe for improvement:

“... leaders need to get off their plinths and come down and talk to people. You can give people guidance about that ... but I think there probably needs to be some kind of self awareness”

Lydia was also more positive about MLP, or at least about the coaching support available as part of the programme:

“... certainly the idea of on-going support for a period of time ... is very good”

but she had a point about the requirement for continuing support that made me think that MLP was, for Lydia, more a question of temporarily plugging a gap rather than striking out in a new direction:

"I ... do feel isolated for a hundred and one varied reasons and some times there isn't an easy way to get support to get out of that sense of isolation."

So she had found a useful way of dealing with an existing problem, at least in the short term. Of course, isolation, or at least loneliness, is sometimes part of what being a 'leader' can imply (eg John F. Kennedy at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, see Binney et al (2005:47)). So should the Department recognise this and take steps to put in place a support mechanism beyond either a 'programme', or temporary coaching, to give leaders support in times of isolation?

I asked Lucy, recently promoted to the Senior Civil Service, about her experiences of MLP.

Lucy: "I am in a slightly unique position because I was on a prior [programme] which was about the public sector more generally and then I did my MBA and focussed on management and leadership in particular. So I probably have a bigger overview and so the specifics that I learned from the Management Leadership Programme in itself probably were things that I already knew."

Perhaps this prior exposure to leadership training made Lucy less concerned about MLP, or more confident about dealing with it, than others. But Lucy was clear that MLP had helped her in several clear ways. She said she benefited from:

"... a much better self awareness of the way in which my style of working interacts with others and I think out of the whole bit of the Management Leadership Programme that is the most successful bit of it."

And she was one of the few interviewees to use academic descriptions of different models of leadership.

Lucy: "24 months ago I wouldn't have talked about transformation or transactional leadership they wouldn't have made any sense – you could describe the style of each if it would make sense but I wouldn't be using

those words and to know and understand that is quite important because you could then change the way in which you behave depending on the particular situation."

This contrasts with Gareth's failure to remember theories of leadership and perhaps describes a rift between those civil servants for whom academic approaches are irrelevant and those who see value in them.

Finally, Lucy also referred to the value of the coaching. She said the other strength of MLP is:

"... the opportunity to test things out in a safe environment with your coach ... you can test things that you are going to do with somebody who has already been there and been successful ... so I think those ... things combined mean that I have probably changed the way in which I behave with my staff."

This is altogether more positive, finding ways of using the resource that MLP offers, to improve individual and team performance.

Martin had come from another Government Department as a team leader and he too had had some experience of leadership training:

"Two years ago, three years ago I suppose – yes – three years ago we were starting to explore what was meant about leadership ...erm...it's a strange one really they tend to be relatively small elements of courses that I've done so far – I've certainly never done something that was called leadership – here you are – let's go on a leadership programme."

He was quick to identify one of the contentious points about leadership training:

"there's always been quite a big debate as I understand it about whether you can train a leader or whether it's actually innate. I think there's quite a view that says you know some people have got it and some people haven't".

I asked him what he thought:

"there are certainly some people who haven't got it and never will have ... I worked with an old Chief Executive – very knowledgeable, published author – everything like that but put the guy on a stage and ask him to inspire an audience - he just ... he couldn't do it ... Ha ha ... I'm going to try and sit on the fence here. I think it is ... I think there is to a large extent I think of ... it's innate. You've got it or you haven't."

James was another old hand who had experience of both team leadership and the Senior Civil Service. His first reaction was to see MLP not as a thing of beauty or utility, but as an example of how the Department fails to provide support for senior staff.

"Where I think this Department is lousy is actually at helping people who are newly promoted to the Senior Civil Service ... they are usually people in their mid 30s, they've probably not had a wide range of experience ... they've got tremendous intellect, they've got tremendous potential ... [but] ... there were three newly promoted Grade 5s at this MLP development centre and they were struggling and they were very isolated and feeling very isolated"

This is not, I think, the same as the isolation Lydia felt which was a point about leaders in general. What James is describing here is about induction on promotion.

On reflection, though, James thought MLP a good thing:

"I think that ...initially that was very good because it was very helpful in positioning myself and thinking about managing ... now it's moved on more towards my own personal career development and where I'm going and trying to achieve things like that which is also useful I think."

At a high level these mixed messages continued to turn up. Mark had completed his development centre a year or so before, so had had time to think about its value.

"I was really positive about it actually because it was, I thought, the reverse of the traditional kind of sheep dip approach ... erm....I thought it was well handled, I thought the people running it were skilful and capable. I thought ... it was exposing really important issues for me but actually funnily enough I'm not sure they were right actually. I do just wonder whether... if actually the diagnosis was quite as helpful as [I thought it] was going to be – having said which I did think it was a good programme and the coaching has been exceptionally good."

So Mark gives high marks indeed for the process, but perhaps less for the content. Later on we'll see that one of Mark's concerns was that he now feels he was deflected onto spending time on matters of comparatively little importance by the outcomes from the tests applied in MLP. Summing up his experience of MLP, Mark said:

"I wouldn't say it was about leadership – I would say it was about management."

Finally, a newly promoted team leader, Ian explained that he wanted some leadership training:

"I've been quite desperate to get onto some sort of leadership training because I, you know ...once you get in that position of being Team Leader then you feel that you ought to have least get some understanding of some of the context behind how you can actually do a better job",

"So you feel completely un-trained?" I said,

"I do" he said.

He may have said he was untrained, but we'll see later that he had firm views about what he needed to be able to do, so he wasn't speaking from a position of ignorance. Once again, this appears to be a question of prompt and effective induction on promotion.

Initial conclusions

We have here a mixed set of views, not surprisingly. Faced with a mandatory programme in leadership and management, skills one might expect some civil servants to have to some extent already, it would be unusual to find unanimity of views. But the data suggests there are two key points to investigate. The first question for detailed analysis is, is effective training in leadership possible?

Several people talked about feeling isolated ("I ... do feel isolated"), or lacking confidence ("... quite a lot of people need confidence building ..."), or gaining in self awareness ("... [MLP gave me] ... a much better self awareness"). Taking the three as related aspects of the same issue, the second question is can leadership training make a significant contribution to emotional self wellbeing?

Is effective training in leadership possible?

Sadler reports Handy as saying "... leadership skills cannot be taught ..." and Bennis and Nanus as saying "... leadership is something that can be learned by anyone ..." (2003:101). Binney et al say "... we believe you can learn about leading ... it is a process that can be learnt about and improved ..." (2005:211). Although some doubt its primacy as the vehicle of choice, one or two preferring informal to formal learning, all the interviewees agreed that training can help at least to some extent. No-one sided with de Geus (1999) who says that "... leadership has as little to do with learning as decision making does ... a leader who learns is a leader who is unsure ...". Nor did anyone discuss the evolutionary psychology theory which says that we can develop leaders (because the innate qualities, the genes, are present) but not train someone to be a successful leader if the essential pre-requisites are missing (see Nicholson 2000, Chapter 4).

The doubters prefer a softer, less processy, more organic approach, and those at the extreme would not have formal programme at all. You will recall Gareth who said "... I learned far more from watching [Head of a Public Sector Agency], as a really superb leader in the Civil Service context than I would ever do from anything else ...", although he admitted he "...took away one or two useful things ..." from a course he had been on. Paul added "... [MLP] was terribly technical and process orientated ...". Certainly there is something about the context of learning. Binney et al (2005:216) would put training firmly into the work context rather than taking it away, into an 'awayday' for example, although they do say there needs to be 'thinking space'.

Gareth and Paul are both experienced civil servants. Contrast their reaction with the thoughts of someone who had just been promoted to team leader. Ian told me:

"... I felt then I had to exercise some leadership ... because I saw myself as the responsible person to actually deliver the ... strategy successfully. I was conscious all the time that there were things I needed to do, you know, not in terms of keeping people informed ... but there's also, you know, keeping people committed and, you know, happy and, you know, making sure everyone was happy ... so I was conscious of when I was doing that work of, you know, some aspects of leadership which I needed to keep an eye on and develop and I was also conscious of the fact that, you know, it's probably a lot needs to be done to actually form... formally help me do it better."

Ian clearly already has a sense of what a leader needs to be able to do, and that he needs support to make a success of it. And Ian was clear that some of this could be done in a training programme:

"... I certainly feel that you can learn some of the skills of leadership so that you're not completely useless at it but there are some natural aspects of character which can help you know to make leadership much easier for

some people compared to others. Like playing football really isn't it? Ha, ha, ha".

Telling Ian to go away and watch a model leader in action, or that training is too processy, won't be enough. He has identified a training need and wants it met, although he implies that some aspects are not best learnt in a formal setting. And what about timing? Should newly promoted team leaders start on MLP at once, or after they have had a chance to develop their skills in the practical professional context? Is it generally the perspective of someone new to a team leader role that training is useful, and that older hands tend to reject the training solution? I asked James, an experienced team leader who had operated at higher levels as well, whether 'leadership' is something that can be taught as a set of skills or is it something more organic – something that is inside you as well?

James: "It's not an either/or is it? There are some people who have a natural authority and natural leadership who naturally get things right – there are others, and I am one of those – who don't – who have to work at it – who have to, through experience, through watching others, through learning development techniques, develop the way of doing things may be that go against your natural inclinations sometimes so it has to be both."

So, again, we have a clear emerging theme of training complementing experience and, particularly, learning from others, and a resistance to any notion that training can equip someone with the full set of skills. I asked Lucy, who had recently written her MBA thesis on leadership, whether, given that MLP was a standard programme, there was a risk that it assumed the same approach would suit all, that it was training from a book.

Lucy: "I'm not sure that the programme is like that because the starting point is you go through an assessment process and identify where your needs are and that to me is very individualised ... I think you can get ideas from a range of stimulus and a book is one of them, the discussion with coach is another, actually looking at other leaders in your own or other

organisations is the third ... I think particularly at this level but at most levels people are adult enough to be able to pick what's useful to them but the idea of having your coach or a mentor whoever it may be to help filter them is good because otherwise you only ever go for the styles that you are personally attracted to and the chances are those work in some situations and not in others."

But she raised an interesting point about participants on MLP. At the outset MLP was voluntary, although it is now mandatory for Divisional Manager and Team Leader grades (Directors have their own programme which includes many elements of MLP, and the programme for less senior grades is voluntary at the moment). Lucy had a theory about the voluntarism,

"... my criticism of [MLP] is if you are someone who is open to new ideas it works very well, if you are someone who has a particular style of leadership that you believe works you will just find all of the feedback too overwhelming and in fact some people won't even go on the programme in the first instance because they don't feel that they need to learn any more ...".

She went on to hypothesise that those who did not volunteer early on would be less likely to be good people managers and less likely to be open to new ideas. This research cannot establish whether that is the case or not, but it would be interesting later to see whether there is any correlation between the speed with which individuals took up the MLP offer and later career development, such as promotion. Is the speedy take up of Departmental training linked to positive attributes (such as open mindedness) that lead to significant career progression? If such a link could be established it might motivate those who are negative about MLP or training in general.

Finally I spoke to a Director who had been through the top management version of MLP. He brought me back to some of the points raised earlier on about role models. Andrew said

"I quite like sort of reading and understanding different analytical models I mean you don't need to go on a training programme to do any of that – I also like trying to learn by observing people who I think have been good leaders or are good leaders and for me probably the single most powerful influence was my previous boss ... I think that's the most powerful form of training – find a good leader and then get close enough that you can watch what they do and reflect on it and come through".

He didn't rule out a more formal approach, however,

"... the third element where I think training programmes can be useful is putting you together in a group of peers facing similar circumstances and then talking through what you actually face in your job ... I personally prefer the first two which would not need training programmes to do them".

The consensus is that leadership training is both possible and valuable, but by no means the only, or necessarily the best, way of developing leadership skills.

Can leadership training make a significant contribution to emotional wellbeing?

Fineman (2000:1) describes work organisations aptly as richly textured social dramas, "emotional arenas". So it isn't surprising that words such as 'confidence', 'isolation' and 'self awareness' have been used pretty freely. The Department is a traditional machine culture in which owning up to problems in these areas is not often regarded as courageous; in the heat of day-to-day battle, the more traditional organisational competencies of strength demonstrated by a dogged ability to drive through ones own point of view, is more highly valued. Seeking consensus and active partnership is not by itself highly regarded – allied to achieving objectives it is valued as a process rather than an outcome in its own right. The PIU report refers to the civil service blame culture, multiple layers of

control, and the undervaluing of leadership in parts of the public sector (PIU 2000: para 2.13/2.14). So it was not surprising these issues exist, and that interviewees wanted to discuss them.

Of course, there could be more than one motivation for this. The most likely is straightforward honesty – these are issues that concern people and that some people find interviews conducive to opening up. Another possibility is that interviewees found this a gilt edged opportunity to get back at the system, and get off their chests something that bugged them. This is important for the organisation. The way leaders demonstrate, or fail to demonstrate, compassionate activity reinforces or diminishes the extent to which compassion is valued (Frost et al 2002:36). A third, which I do not think was a major issue in this case, is that these issues are not important in themselves but that interviewees used them to hide other personal shortcomings.

Let's start with Lucy whose position was not as starkly set out as it was for others. As a result of MLP she said:

"I think I have changed the way I interact with individual people ... I started off by thinking I should deal with each person in the same way and that consistency was the right approach but my feedback is that's not what people want, they want me to move towards them and that's been quite a shift for me ...".

For her, the programme made a difference. This links to her earlier comments about open-minded people being more likely to volunteer for MLP in the first place. It is reasonable to draw the conclusion that her willingness to adapt, her open-mindedness, gave her the opportunity to benefit from the programme in the way she did.

So, if some found MLP helpful in regaining confidence or reducing isolation, were these problems already generally prevalent in the Department, or had MLP itself exposed it in these individuals. James was sure this was general problem; he said:

"... the other area where I don't think they are very good at giving people support is people coming in from outside and it's a case of right, we've recruited you – get on with it and they sink or swim ... my current boss once said to me – you know the first three months were horrible ... she was in a hostile environment when she was actually in the office and that's still true I think to some degree so we are not very good at nurturing and helping people in that situation – which is almost well, you got to that level – you are capable otherwise you wouldn't have got there. Yes we give you some courses and help but it's not enough."

Binney et al (2005:223) say that "... one of the shocking findings of our research was the degree to which organisations invest money and effort in finding new leaders and then, once they are appointed, abandon them...". Given the cost and risk of appointing leaders, especially from outside the organisation as the civil services is doing more and more, this lack of support is hard to understand.

So MLP is not enough. If we are to get the best out of leaders, according to James, there needs to be a systemic or cultural change. This fits well with what others have said about MLP, and may well have said about any training or development programme. As James went on to explain,

"... I think that you can't assume that ... that ... because ... which is what the organisation does, it assumes that because they've got to Grade 5 they must have these miraculously all these fully formed leadership qualities and attributes that would enable them to function ...er..er..er..fully from the word go. They are going to be still learning – they are going to need support from their senior managers and from the organisation over all if they are to develop effectively and to grow in the job."

But there were some interesting insights at a more detailed level. Mark, who enjoyed his stint on MLP and was impressed by what he saw, had reflected on his experience and now wondered whether it hadn't been, partially at least, a bit of a distraction.

"It's odd", he said "...there was...there was a number of issues about emotional intelligence that came out about me which may be were right or not I don't know but that's the sort of benefit of another year's thinking about it. I'm not sure if they were the most fundamentally important issues that I need to address in terms of either being a more effective manager here or actually having a more effective career so I'm slightly worried now that although I thought it was a really good programme that it sort of may be off in slightly the wrong direction"

I asked him whether teaching leadership was possible.

"I think.....I think you can teach people to be a lot better at it ... some of the first management training I ever did was particularly helpful in giving me a kind of frame of reference about things you know a number of kind of mental models about how to manage, how to deal with situation, how to evaluate issues, how to create strategies, how to do stakeholder analyses – all these sorts of things ... and then the coaching has been good recently in the sense of getting me to reflect more on how I've approached ideas."

This is not unlike Fiedler's contingency theory which is about situational factors that lead to leader anxiety and cause the leader to fall back on "... previous successful reinforced behaviour patterns ..." (Fiedler 1993:16). Mark seems to be conforming to that model in this example.

I asked him then what coaching added.

"An example erm...and it relates to this emotional intelligence thing actually, one of the things that you know I'm the kind of person whose fairly kind of analytical and not tremendously kind of emotional about issues andI'll argue fairly passionately for an idea but if I can see that it's kind of lost then I'll move onto the next one and never mind, whatever...erm...or if we're facing a major kind of change or staffing reductions I'll kind of feel pissed off about it as much as the next person for a while but then think

well we've got to do it so let's get on with it – what are the practical steps to make it happen.”

So where has the change in attitude come from?

“I suppose some of the coaching was about well think about it from other people's perspective – what do some of your staff feel about this and would they feel the same if they knew that other people may feel extremely personally hurt ... if you don't get them to work through those issues ... if you're not sympathetic to that and if you don't address that properly then you never move on and so on ...so there are a sort of...that was quite good really so for me. It's often about stopping to think before I rush in and charge forward and see that it's actually perfectly obvious we've got to get on with this.”

This rather long piece of data is about someone who has been confronted with an alternative way of seeing things, not unlike Lucy's experience (you'll recall she once had a single way of dealing with people and found that she needed to tailor her approach to individuals if she was to maximise her effectiveness). It is arguable that the issue here is magnified by the gender of the interviewee; research has consistently shown that women leaders score more highly than men on interpersonal relationships (for example “women managers, on average, were judged more satisfying and effective to work for as well as more likely to generate extra effort from their people” Bass and Avolio (1997)), so a man coming to terms with it is of particular interest. It would have been interesting to find out how the point arose in the first place; I can think of several potential trigger points (there are three or four MLP exercises in which interpersonal dealing are key, for example, each of which would have been followed up by a coach feeding back to Mark).

Conclusions

The Department is clear that their MLP and Introduction to Leadership Programme are "... highly regarded by participants and their managers and across Whitehall ..." and remain their "... flagship leadership development programmes..." (DfES 2004:4). But a recurring theme about MLP is what exactly is it about. For example, what in fact is the balance between 'management' and 'leadership' on the programme; and does the programme set out to 'teach' leadership? Clearly, Paul thought that it was supposed to do so – others said that the programme was more about self development.

The development centre was a mixture of the positivistic and the subjective; it put people into the same set of exercises under the same conditions (pressure to prepare an argument; pressure to achieve a result; being observed; knowledge that one was in fact being assessed whatever the Department said, even if it was assessment against one's own potential rather than assessment against a Departmental standard) – we're back to Fiedler's leadership anxiety in contingency theory. But within the exercises there was a good degree of latitude for individual participants to react in their own way and make sense of the test in their own terms. Indeed, that was the point, since the understanding was that the MLP process would lead to self-development.

But there was some resistance to the whole process, some reluctance to give the programme an unequivocal thumbs-up. Some said that the MLP was overwhelming.

It is possible that the Department might be falling into the trap described by Beer et al (1990) of attempting the doomed strategy of imposing change from the centre. Beer et al (1990) say that a 'programmatic approach', which is characterised by "... 'corporate culture' programmes, training courses, quality circles, and new pay-for-performance" will fail and companies should instead follow a 'task alignment' approach based on "... aligning employee roles, responsibilities,

and relationships to address the organisation's most important competitive task ...". This means the driver for change is the organisation's business not a centrally determined change programme, however well meant and however important the centre sees it. Whether the centre is willing to be driven by the periphery is, of course, uncertain. As Beer et al (1990) put it "... this mind set is difficult to maintain in an environment that presses for quarterly earnings ...", and the civil service is not immune from the same pressures.

Neither is it sure that resistance to training should be equated with negativity. Nevis (1987) suggests that resistance should be regarded as energy to be mobilised, and resisters as potentially champions of change. Coch and French (1948) and Kotter and Schlesinger (1979) suggest that setting clear goals, and involving and motivating the workforce, helps promote the right environment for change, which echoes the finding in Chapter 4 here about what constitutes effective leadership in the civil service.

What we have here is a centrally generated learning and development programme that people found by turns exciting, useful, and threatening. It also surfaced worries about isolation and confidence. It is evidence that MLP makes a considerable impact, perhaps sometimes in unexpected ways. The Department would do well to review its expectations of MLP, consult those who have been through it, and re-design the programme as a whole so as to meet the needs of the organisation to have effective, confident leaders at all levels in the workplace, with more than half an eye on turning resisters into change champions.

Chapter 6

CIVIL SERVANTS AND MINISTERS

Introduction

This chapter explores the leadership elements of the relationship between civil servants and government Ministers from the point of view of a group of civil servants in one office. This chapter does not set out to explore the historical question of the role of civil servants and government and how the role has developed and been shaped over the years. That ground has been covered comprehensively by others, such as Hennessey (1989). In this research all the civil servants interviewed worked directly for the same set of ministers heading the Department for Education and Skills. Whereas a civil servant might have a career of up to 40 years working for one department, a Minister typically moves departments every two or three years. Pollitt and Bourkaert suggest that the longevity of the civil servants' position, which is normal in Canada and New Zealand, as well as the UK, and thus not just a British phenomenon, brings the benefits of "...continuity and ... knowledge ..." and the drawbacks of "...conservatism and limited breadth of view ..." (Pollitt and Burkeart 2000:52). So the question arises, who leads whom in this situation, or is leadership somehow shared, and whatever the practical outcomes, is the relationship explicitly or implicitly agreed? What tensions arise and how are they resolved? Is there a common, shared, understanding of the position amongst the civil servants? Indeed, is the practical relationship enshrined anywhere; and is it the same whoever the ministers and whoever the civil servants?

It could be argued that civil servants are in an unusual position in that they knowingly set out to work for elected politicians from a variety of political stand points whilst often having strong political views themselves which may not align

with those of their ministers and which will almost certainly fluctuate between being close to, and distant from, the prevailing political narrative as Governments come and go. That is not to say other workers are free from ethical or moral questions, for example, workers in an arms manufacturer or a cigarette factory may not always find it easy to come to terms with the dilemmas of their employment; but civil servants go into this turbulent and uncertain relationship with their eyes open knowing this tension exists, and that it will ebb and flow as political parties exchange power and when Governments face controversial decisions. But received wisdom is that one of the attractions of public employment is that of 'doing good' and of 'having a beneficial effect on society', so are civil servants attempting to bring their own influence, and thus leadership on policy issues, to the table? If 'yes', what does that mean for the leadership of a department of state where one might expect Ministers to lead on questions of strategic policy, at least? (This assertion, which is probably a 'taken-for-granted' by most people, is supported by the evidence that follows.)

Whether or not that sort of personal influence is present in civil servants, part of the role of a public servant is to exercise professional scrutiny and apply the highest standards in matters such as probity, good use of public money and fairness of treatment. As Pollitt and Bourkaert put it, the study of public administration, whilst concerned with effectiveness, also focuses on "... democracy, accountability, equity and probity ..." (Pollitt and Bourkaert, 2000:9). This is, perhaps, even more important since the reforms of the public sector that began in the 1980s which set up new bodies to run public services, such as NHS Trusts, the Learning and Skills Council, the Child Support Agency (see Ferlie et al 1996:195 et seq). This means in theory at least that civil servants could sometimes be at odds with their ministers, or at least that advice on financial or management issues for example that they do not wish to hear, may have to be given to ministers. If that is right, this means that disagreements, or even fully fledged rows, with national politicians who appear daily in our newspapers and on television, are possible, even if rare, and that such disagreements might be on policy as well as technical issues of professional judgement. How does that impact on leadership?

It is important to note that, formally, civil servants are not supposed to help ministers with work that is either party political business or constituency business. This provides a buffer that should keep civil servants away from day-to-day political controversy and allow any conflict that may occur to be played out within the boundaries of departmental responsibilities and within the constitutional responsibilities of Government and Parliament. In discussing work with ministers or with Parliament, civil servants are frequently referred to as 'officials' in order to distinguish them from 'ministers'. That underlines the separation between 'official' business and 'political' business.

There is very little written specifically about the relationship between Ministers and their officials. There are codes of conduct for both which will be referenced in this chapter, but they are about ethics and behaviour and concern issues of leadership only tangentially. The best read, by far, is Gerald Kaufman's "How to be a Minister", first written in 1980 shortly after Mr Kaufman ceased being a Labour Government Minister, but one has to read between the lines in what is very much a personal account and by no means an academic book. A good example is

"However you [ie. a Minister] travel, and whatever your purpose, you will be accompanied by: one Private Secretary, carrying in his anonymous government-issue brown or black leather briefcase, the briefing for your trip (which he will press upon you the moment you get into the car), his Ed McBain novel and his mobile telephone to which he will appear indissolubly attached as if by prosthetic surgery; one official from the relevant policy division, carrying in his anonymous government-issue brown or black leather briefcase, *his* copy of the briefing plus voluminous files to amplify this if needed, together with the collected works of Ossian which he has brought to read for pleasure; and one Press Officer, who will have brought with him nothing but a copy of the *Daily Mail*, so that you will have to take pity on him and allow him to read the full set of daily newspapers you have had brought along. These three will converse with each other about civil service matters, paying no attention to you and thus letting you get on with

your Ed McBain. Since you are the minister you will carry nothing.”
(Kaufmann 1997:131)

Would you say that ‘carrying nothing’ implied a certain authority, a certain aloofness that signifies if not an out-and-out leader then certainly a superiority of the sort a leader might enjoy? In Kaufman’s amusing account has he deliberately, or accidentally, identified some of the trappings a minister enjoys that puts him or her at once in the category of leader rather than follower? What is fascinating about this excerpt from his book is that it is as true today as it was 30 years ago – except perhaps that with modern communications the press officer would be regarded now as a luxury, who could be contacted by the mobile phone that Kaufman rightly says is ever present.

Who leads a Government department?

Who acts as leader in a Government Department, and how, if they are different, does the leadership role for senior civil servants link to, or overlap with, the leadership role for Ministers?

With his wealth of experience, Gareth had some very clear ideas.

“I think [officials and Ministers] only come to loggerheads ... if the senior civil servant attempts to exert leadership ... in a way that conflicts with the Ministers’ legitimate expectations”.

That seems straightforward, but who defines ‘legitimate expectations’ here? Is it a phrase that any civil servant could be expected to understand and define in a single way? Or is it part of the culture of government, a culture that shifts and evolves over time (see Pollitt and Bourkaert 2000:137, and the discussion at the end of this chapter).

Gareth himself goes on to put some flesh on the bones:

“It seems to me that Ministers have leadership in two directions, one of them is leadership in their Department ... the Civil Service wants a Secretary

of State who makes it clear to them what it is he wants and what he wants you to do, [and the other is the] enormously important [task of] informing, shaping, guiding public debate and giving some structure to it. It is a very hard role ...”

So there are internal and external roles, but both are problematic. In the first role, Gareth seems to be saying that Ministers must be clear about what it is they want the civil service to do, but there is a presumption that Ministers must stop short of managing the detail. Every Government Department has a Permanent Secretary who is responsible, a bit like a CEO in a private company, for achieving the agreed policy objectives for the Department, and for corporate affairs such as staffing and financial matters. But where exactly does the ministerial role stop; and to what extent does the Minister’s involvement amount to leadership?

There are some rules that are clearly set out on the Ministerial Code of Conduct; for example this passage which is the first in the section headed Minister and Civil Servants:

“Ministers have a duty to give fair consideration and due weight to informed and impartial advice from civil servants, as well as to other considerations and advice, in reaching policy decisions; a duty to uphold the political impartiality of the Civil Service, and not to ask civil servants to act in any way which would conflict with the Civil Service Code; a duty to ensure that influence over appointments is not abused for partisan purposes; and a duty to observe the obligations of a good employer with regard to terms and conditions of those who serve them. Civil servants should not be asked to engage in activities likely to call in to question their political impartiality, or to give rise to the criticism that people paid from public funds are being used for Party political purposes” (Code 2005:12).

This sets some ground rules but it doesn’t address the heart of the leadership issue. Ministers could meet, or fail to meet, these requirements and still be leaders, or not.

In the second role, the public debate role, we come up against an issue that appears uncontroversial, except when the circumstances are exceptional. If the civil service is to remain neutral and professional, how far can civil servants go in public to give an opinion, or invite discussion? To go too far risks undermining the professional neutrality of the civil service. So is this a leadership role that is reserved exclusively for Ministers? It is not quite that simple, however. Let me give two examples. When an election is called, instructions are issued to all civil servants about what they can and can't do in the period leading up to voting. In the case of a general election, the civil service, for a period of four or five weeks up to polling day, must do everything required to keep normal Government business running smoothly but can't do anything that might be seen as advantageous to one of the political parties involved (so promoting the take up of TV licences would be fine since that is day-to-day business and, once the licence fee cost is settled, is not controversial, but civil servants couldn't promote a public consultation on an area of new policy – the latter might be seen as promoting the existing governing party by advancing its own political agenda at the expense of other parties contesting the election).

The second example is the public row between Michael Howard, then Home Secretary, and Derek Lewis, Head of the Prison Service. On 13 May 1997, in the final days of the Conservative administration, a critical inquiry into a series of prison escapes was published. Michael Howard had sought to distance the Government from this episode by blaming the prison service. In a television interview with Jeremy Paxman, Mr Howard was asked twelve times whether he had "... threatened to overrule ..." Mr Lewis, but on each occasion replied that he "did not overrule him", thus avoiding the word "threaten" (Wikipedia 2007). This was seen by some at the time to be the Home Secretary deliberately avoiding dealing with the question of a minister exercising authority where he had none – by seeking to manage, in this instance at least, an agency under the control of a civil servant. There was an explicit contradiction in how each had interpreted the scope of their responsibility which hinged on the confusion that existed over the extent of Mr Lewis' authority. Was the minister in this case crossing the line

between the two men's legitimate authorities, or did the minister's remit run as far as he chose to run it? This is exactly the dilemma that Ferlie et al (1996) discuss. It is also debatable just how successful Ministers have been in shifting responsibility from what they may seek to position as policy failure, (see Clarke and Newman (1997:144), although they add that "... the dominant tendency has been to depoliticise decision making through the dispersal of power to managerially controlled organisations..."). The politician, Mr Howard, won the argument, of course, which is a lesson for all civil servants.

So how far do Ministers go in setting the detail, and what does this mean for leadership in the civil service?

When the Labour Government was elected in 1997 they came to power with some policies pretty well worked out. For example, in opposition they had written a pamphlet on the New Deal which gave a fair amount of operational detail about how the main programme for young people was to run (eg the Employment Service rather than the Training and Enterprise Councils would run it). In those circumstances it might be said that the vision was given by Ministers down to a pretty low level of detail. But as Paul told me, this wasn't the case for some of the off-shoots from New Deal. He said

"I played quite a strong part ... going to Ministers and saying look, this is how you can do it if you want to achieve these objectives ... the sorts of services you need to put in place are these, the key organisations you need to bring on board are these, the amount of money it is going to cost you is this, here are the options you've got around for flexing it"

Which, Paul said, left him a clear leadership role. This is an example of Ministers setting the overall agenda and officials adding a lot to the debate at a high level of detail. However, Rosalie told me about a danger in this approach; she warned that ministers might just:

"... expect us to do it and if it's really difficult, or if it's really expensive we can try and advise them [of the dangers] but they don't have that same sense of responsibility that a manager of a company or a charity or whatever has because we have that sort of separation between civil servants doing the work and ministers coming up with the ideas."

This is now a complex set of interactions. On the one hand Paul is saying that he relished the opportunity to go to ministers with solutions to their problems but on the other hand, Rosalie said that ministers could not be expected to exercise the same diligence that might be found in a leader in the private or voluntary sector. Is Paul energised by the former and Rosalie worried by the latter? They are clearly not mutually exclusive, but are both conditions inevitable, or common-place? Paul is a career civil servant, Rosalie a recent, but senior, appointment from outside the public service. It is possible to conclude on this evidence that the two see what is, essentially, the same opportunity, in such completely different ways, because, as a non-career civil servant, Rosalie had an altogether different set of priorities and risks in mind when faced with these circumstances. This is, of course, Pollitt and Bourkaert's (2000) point about probity. Is Paul so attuned to that issue that it, for him, is implicit, or is he being a bit cavalier?

But Paul agreed with Gareth's points about setting strategy:

"... we are very rarely able to develop a completely new agenda off a blank piece of paper ... [we can't do] the Richard Branson type of thing. There has been an odd occasion when that was possible, you could think back to [a previous Permanent Secretary] when there was a period when it was truly possible but I think it is also interesting that when that does happen the Government eventually gets uncomfortable with it."

I wonder why Paul says 'Government' here, rather than 'ministers'? The two terms are interchangeable at one level, but in this context Paul is saying that this discomfort went wider than departmental ministers. Surely this is civil servants

pushing hard at the limit of their leadership role and, perhaps, going beyond them. Paul implies this doesn't happen much now.

A common theme was that all this depends on the mindset of Ministers. Paul contrasted two recent Secretaries of State. In the case of one of them, he said

"... you knew who was the leader and you knew, whether you liked it or not, you were doing what they told you."

Rosalie put it graphically:

"... they just tend to float in and say we're going to go to 'X' even if we were going to 'Y' last time."

And Lydia agreed:

"...I do say react rather than take control because I think we do tend to react to [Ministers] rather than try and lead the direction."

Catherine made the same point (contrasting the same two Secretaries of State) but added that that influence didn't spread to more junior ministers:

"... the leadership does come from the Secretary of State. You always feel you're working in their Department with their priorities ... I worked to [a junior minister] but he is doing the Secretary of State's bidding so I don't think he gives leadership, as such. I think he is the manager."

If the Secretary of State is the leader, and the junior minister the manager, then what role does that leave for the civil servant? Anyway, a consensus at a high level is emerging. I will look at what it means in more detail later in this chapter.

A complicating factor is the speed with which ministers come and go. The distinction with the private sector is not that they do not have change at the top, but that in national politics, change is not only much more frequent but when whole Governments change it can be very disruptive. Catherine again:

"I mean it's so short term and you can listen to them and you think well, in a year's time you won't be here and it will be somebody else and that can be a kind of element of cynicism, can't it?"

If that also limits the responsibility that Ministers can be expected to bear personally it must correspondingly increase the responsibility of the civil service to act in the long term interest of public good – as defined by Ministers but influenced by probity and fairness. For example, all but very short-term expenditure will only show a positive or negative return under a subsequent Secretary of State, or even a subsequent government, so some financial responsibility falls to the civil service whether or not they favoured making the expenditure in the first place. As Rosalie put it:

"...it's really nice if you can just make decisions and tell people to do things without having all that responsibility and all that accountability ... I think that does mean that decisions are made badly."

This point about civil servants responsibility for probity in public funding is covered in the Ministerial Code which says

"Heads of Departments and the chief executives of executive agencies are appointed as Accounting Officers. The essence of the role is a personal responsibility for the propriety and regularity of the public finances for which he or she is responsible; for keeping proper accounts; for the avoidance of waste and extravagance; and for the efficient and effective use of resources." (Code 2005:12)

The Code goes on to set out what happens if there is a conflict with Ministers, and makes it clear that in the end Ministers will prevail, but the civil servant must report the facts, to register that they do "... not bear personal responsibility for the actions concerned ..." (Code 2005:12).

So if there is a responsibility deficit with Ministers, which civil servants must help fill, what does that say about leadership in the civil service? It is clear that the

interviewees recognise the issue and don't seem overly concerned by it – so is part of their leadership role to embrace this complexity and steer themselves and their staff through any difficulties that it could cause? Certainly these complexities are long standing, well known, and expected (Pollitt and Bourkaert 2000).

On the other hand, since politicians are elected, they carry an authority that, say, an appointed CEO cannot ever have. And that is not just the authority of success at the polls, but authority born of the politicians' rapport with, and understanding of, their constituents and their constituents' problems and priorities. Catherine worked some of the time for a minister leading on youth policies; she said:

“... [the minister] understands the issues because he's got a background in youth work and the voluntary sector world ... when he gets out there talking to people his passion and commitment come through ... they trust him and believe him.”

So the minister carries that indirect, public, authority with him into meetings with officials, and officials are influenced by it when they make recommendations. But that doesn't impact on leadership does it? Or does the knowledge that the Minister carries a significant weight of expert public opinion mean his leadership is underlined – or even extended?

James brought an alternative perspective:

“... it's back to Macmillan's point about when he was asked the greatest thing that influenced what he did and he said “Events dear boy, events” – and you know - what was the 1997 Labour Party manifesto pledged on Iraq? Zippo – it wasn't there.”

Whilst this is self evident, it is also very important. In contrast to the detail in the 1997 New Deal plans, all ministers face dealing with 'events' for which there is no plan, no detail. As James says:

"Things come up that they need advice and help on – they will have their ideas and they'll have a starting point perhaps because where they kind ofcoming from in political philosophy terms but they won't have a detailed worked through plan ..."

James was able to give a particular example of 'events' in his policy area:

"... the change from TECs to Learning and Skills Councils, well part of that was a political imperative but part of it was because [a minister] got pissed off with the TECs because of a particular instance in a particular locality ..."

So civil servants must work with Ministers who have a clear, if implied, leadership role, who differ markedly one from another, stay only a short time, carry a great deal of direct and indirect authority with the public, and have to bend with the weight of 'events'. We have seen how the probity responsibility gives the civil service a legitimate leading role. But not all decisions are made by Ministers. Again, the distinction between what is for them, and what is not for them, is not always clear. Lydia gave me an example where this point was considered explicitly:

"... when I started work on the project one of the early things we discussed was what are we actually going to put to Ministers ... there are matters for us as officials and for the Permanent Secretary to decide upon and not every decision that we take is appropriate for us to refer up to the Minister ... but [the fact that we] had the conversation [at all] is quite unusual"

This suggests that the interface between officials and Ministers is not absolutely clear, not black and white, and calls for individual judgement each time an issue arises. Are the rules for this clear, or are they historic, cultural, practical or hit-and-miss? If such a conversation is rare, then we can assume that most of the time judgement calls are either successful or at least not controversial. But in this example, officials thought they would consider the options before problems arose. In this particular case, the project followed on from a programme that had not gone well, and had over run its budget significantly, and it is likely the

conversation was sparked by officials wishing to get their proposed line of work agreed amongst themselves as much as getting their relationships with ministers sorted. Or is this a case of underlining the division of responsibilities we have already noted, in which the civil service should, or must, lead on, for example, financial probity? In which case, the rarity of the conversation might be symptomatic of the history of the project rather than demonstrating a key point in the leadership of then department.

Initial impressions

It appears that Ministers certainly have the lead role in deciding policy at Departmental level; have an important external communications role; but that civil servants must assume leadership for at least issues of probity and fairness. However, Pollitt and Bourkaert (2000:140) suggest that the simple model of Minister as strategist and opinion leader is not credible. Politicians have not been trained for that role, despite their rhetoric, and that enables them to distance themselves (eg in the Prison Service row) from policy failures. But Lucy might not agree. She said:

“... one of the things that strikes me with all of our Ministers is that they are very effective politicians regardless of what we think of them as individuals. When you put them on a stage they talk the right talk and they say the right things and that is very inspirational”

In the end ministers are focussed on the comparatively short term. Nevertheless, the evidence is that this is a fairly clear day-to-day understanding that Ministers and civil servants have different but complementary leadership roles.

The constitutional position

We will now turn to some more detailed points that interviewees raised in an effort to get underneath some of these generalities. The questions that come up can be grouped into two sets, first about the constitutional position of ministers and civil servants; and secondly, about how that relationship works in practice.

On the face of it there is a straightforward relationship in a democracy between the elected Government and the appointed bureaucracy, the civil service. The first makes decisions, the second carries them out. But we have already noted some constraints on this simple model, for example around probity and fairness, and around continuity and knowledge. For some, this rather muddled arrangement may work satisfactorily, but for others there is a much clearer, constitutional position.

Clare, for example, who had had experience of working on constitutional policy for the Cabinet Office said clearly:

"... I can't unilaterally set direction – it has to come from Ministers"

She went further and proposed that civil servants should take more notice of the formal position:

"... if the Civil Service wants to become a profession it needs to have ways of getting [this] across, so that it's stuff we live and breath frankly"

Clare was clear that:

"... it is the Ministers who lead and who take the decisions and that, constitutionally, is our position as senior civil servants"

Clare starts from a firm proposition, that the relationship between Ministers and civil servants is a simple and clear one. She then went an important step further. Not only is the relationship simple and clear, it must also necessarily be simple and clear if the civil service is to establish itself as "... a profession...." Clare is therefore saying that the civil service isn't a profession at the moment, implies strongly that it should be one, and sets out what needs to happen to get there. Why should this be important to Clare? Is it a desire to put the civil service onto a clearer basis so that its position is agreed, and recognised, thus giving civil servants a privileged status? Or is it an attempt to protect civil servants by drawing a firm line round the limits of their authority and responsibility? No-one

else in this study makes observations on this point; no-one suggested the civil service was, or was not, a profession, nor that the relationship between Ministers and the civil service was as simple and clear as this, nor, further, that the relationship needed to be put on so formal a basis. Perhaps it is Clare's experience at the Cabinet Office that prompts this concern.

But, having made these interesting points, Clare then went on to describe how, in practice, the relationship was more complex than that and how, in reality, such a simple statement of the relationship would in fact fail to capture how the relationship really worked:

"... you need quite a lot of input from your Minister when you're designing something especially in a new area of policy ... erm ... and we tend not to get that ... we tend to leave it far too long and then write a big formal submission you know instead of having the vital 10 minutes saying well would you like this, or this, or this, ... and what's your feeling about 'X' or whatever... ."

But she added that contact with political advisors could be "... brilliant ..." and that that could fill some of the gaps. Political, or special, advisers are temporary civil servants appointed by the Secretary of State, and who move on when the Secretary of State moves. They give advice to officials to help them take account of ministers' preferences.

James developed that theme, and brought in the important consideration of personalities.

"I think this is quite a difficult [area] because there is the constitutional theory about it and then there is the practice which is about working relationships and human beings and ...and...and...and...the first is a constant because there is a theory about the relationship; Minister's decide, Minister's have responsibility, Civil Servants' advise, Civil Servants carry through, erm and carry out the wishes erm...of...of...of...Ministers – but what actually

happens in reality is dependent on who is the Minister, who is the Prime Minister, how coherent, how thought out a plan they have got."

And then James went further and drew out the strategic implications of the ministerial/civil service interface:

"ultimately isn't there a coincidence of interest that it's the Civil Service's job to serve impartially any government of whatever political colour so our interest is to implement what Minister's want – their interest is to ensure that what they want is implemented so actually there is a coincidence of interest."

This now sounds a bit too pally. Are Ministers and civil servants really that close? Surely not, if the civil service has the task of managing probity and fairness, unless of course Ministers also have that as a top priority. It might be slightly concerning to some (opposition political parties for example) if Ministers and the civil service appeared to be working hand-in-glove in all matters. So what is the ideal position?

It can be argued that the 'Minister decide, officials advise' line that James uses to describe the relationship is too simplistic. Advice now comes from a variety of sources. Mark said:

"I think for me the big change is in the multiplicity of different sources of advice that Ministers draw on...er...in order to take decisions – I think it's still pretty standard that once the decision is taken it's over to the machine to get on and do it but - perhaps this is sort of reinterpreting history - but I think at least in the classic Civil Service method the dominant source of advice to Ministers on the back of which they took decisions was the advice that came forward from the Civil Service machine which is what gave it its power and with the rise of special advisers and more direct access to lobby groups of one type or another again to which to some extent is very healthy – it gives you a multiplicity, a diversity of different views coming straight in to inform the decision making process but it is at that point that I think it's

changed not so much in the relationship between decision and implementation it's how the decision gets taken in the first place."

He went on to take in the politics of the situation:

"to some extent I think the formation of New Labour as a highly disciplined election fighting machine brought with it that very intensive engagement in developing ideas when out of office which were then brought into office ...em...and I just don't know whether that was a one off or whether that would be replicated but I think it is possible to exaggerate it."

Of course, all this assumes we are dealing with straightforward, unambiguous, truths that are shared by Parliament, politicians, the public, the press and the civil service. But Martin opened up this point:

"we don't ... we don't do lies. OK we present statistics positively ... I think well that is part of the role of the civil servant isn't it? I mean you know we are partly there to restrain Ministers [if] what they are going to do is unconstitutional or would be a lie ... is it an uneasy alliance, I don't know, to some extent?"

But Lucy agreed with others that:

"... the fact that they are much better ambassadors than any of us are for describing the things that they are passionate about actually does make them extremely powerful, you need to work with them and try and come up with the ideas that best meet their passion."

The evidence is that there is a broad understanding of the nature, if not the detailed word, of the constitutional relationship between Ministers and the civil service. The two sides are clearly working together as a team but with some ground rules to make sure that each understands the limits on the relationship. Whether the relationship could be set down precisely is something people's opinion varies on, from the desire of one person to turn the relationship into a professional

one to others who are content to recognise and work within some broader understanding (eg "... no lies..."). So, however the constitutional aspects of the relationship are understood, what does this mean for day-to-day working relationships?

Day-to-day working relationships

As I have noted, Ministers individually, and as teams, tend to come and go quite regularly. So does the 'leadership' role of the top Minister, the Secretary of State, remain fixed? Lucy thought not; she said:

"... it very much depends on the relationship between the Minister and the senior civil service team where that leadership lies".

Lucy noted that two recent Secretaries of State had played significantly different roles with the same Permanent Secretary, one being more political and less strategic, the other being equally political and strategic. So different Secretaries of State will have different priorities and want to engage at different levels of detail. As Martin put it, it is necessary to:

"... know what is important to Ministers at the moment, what is bothering them, so that you get the people in the Department focussing their attention on those things"

This is not just a case of putting Ministers first, it is also necessary to get the civil service team properly focussed. Martin again:

"... [if] we didn't do that we'd try to gather evidence and give advice on everything willy-nilly wouldn't we? No, we actually have limited resource and we need to focus that resource where it is most needed"

I asked Mark how easy it was for him to be leader when he's got a Minister who might completely overturn a decision tomorrow morning, having led his civil service troops up to the top of the hill and suddenly he's got to go down the

bottom again and start up a different hill. How, I asked him, does that affect your leadership?

"Erm....I don't really...I don't think I have a problem with that. Really I tend to assume actually that if I've got a good enough idea that I'll be able to persuade Ministers to do it and I'd be pretty worried actually if I didn't manage to do that, so it's more a matter of handling them, timing, getting the arguments clear and at times actuallyor may be this is a function of age as well to some extent I know don't really, put up with being pissed about too much [ha ha ha ha]..."

So Mark at once moved the discussion away from Ministerial changes of view to preventing such changes from taking place. What is interesting about this conversation is the extent to which the interviewee wanted to be seen as in control of the relationship with the Minister.

So the task is to focus resources on Ministers' priorities, but doesn't this abdicate the leadership role completely? And what does that mean for internal leadership of the civil servants who have to carry the work out? Martin put it this way:

"... in terms of leadership it is about presenting positively the messages and the policies that the Government has without crossing that boundary into, you know, the party political bun fight."

And that is something that can happen. James gives an example:

"I can see tensions will come up where there are considerations that have to be taken into account that the Civil Service would consider political, like, for example, we are going to trial the skill strategy in two regions, which should those two regions be? The Civil Service put forward advice based on our objective criteria predominantly in terms of the characteristics of the regions, the readiness of the regions, the enthusiasm. The Minister comes back – what about the North West – why did he come back for the North West – because his constituency happens to be there, political profile etc.

which I think is our job to be aware of. It's not our job I'd say to take that into account in making our recommendations; others might disagree. But I think the civil servants were right to be aware ... we know the Minister might come back and say what about the North West, and to be ready with arguments as to why this particular region wasn't ready but using the same objective criteria that we have used to choose the two that we are putting forward."

But what exactly is James saying here? First, he insists that civil servants' decisions should be based on appropriate objective criteria (which raises the question who decides what is appropriate, and what is objective). But second, he says that civil servants must appreciate that the minister is likely to have his own criteria which may include criteria that the civil service should reject (in this case putting the trials into his own constituency). Finally he says the civil service should be ready to argue for its own judgement, using the test of 'appropriate objective criteria' in the knowledge that this may not be immediately, or finally, accepted by the minister.

This is a good example of a precise issue that arises from time to time, and which illustrates a day-to-day working dilemma. James's example may seem trivial but to a civil servant the application of justifiable objective criteria to this kind of task could be seen as the application of the probity and fairness test that we have already seen is a task in which the civil service should be seen to be leading, for the kind of reasons that James's story sets out – to avoid a party political issue deciding an operational matter. It is important to note that James doesn't rule out using the region that contains the Minister's constituency but only if it meets the objective criteria for selection.

Although these accounts sound very much like a management role for the civil service, there appears to be a clear leadership function remaining in the probity and fairness area, and we have seen earlier how there is quite a lot of room for the civil service to influence policy, sometimes from the strategy formed eg non-

mainstream New Deal, as related by Paul, and other times in operational matters. I put it to Martin that this left the lion's share of leadership for Ministers alone:

"Yes. Yes. They are the executive. They are there to make the decisions – the only difference I would say is that they should not have any business in our day-to-day operations. They should not be dealing with our human resource decisions or necessarily our human resource strategies"

But in a Government Department, there are several Ministers and one should not treat them as a unitary force. The power relationship between them as individuals is an important consideration. As Lucy put it:

"... if you have a Secretary of State that you, as a civil servant, have confidence in and can work with, that can be very powerful. If you have a Minister of State or even an Under Secretary, Parliamentary Under Secretary, that is harder to work with, (I shouldn't say this on tape) you can bypass [them], so I think it is a combination of Ministers within their own sort of power hierarchy which is important because that will then influence the way in which you work [with them] as individuals."

In a similar vein, Ian said:

"... some Ministers are more leaders than others ... so you can have a subtle approach by presenting arguments in a way you know that makes them...it certainly makes them feel that they are in control; and then some Ministers are naturally leaders and tell you what they want and others aren't so, aren't so...erm...you'd have to actually adopt a different way depending on which Minister you're dealing with."

Mark had recently finished a two-day workshop on the Department's Management and Leadership Programme (see Chapter 5) and I asked him what he had picked up from that about dealing with Ministers.

Mark: "Yes, yes well actually that was one of the most important things I learned as a result of that workshop actually was when ...how to ... how not to be in a corner with Ministers – it was very, very useful actually; and how to ask questions – I find actually with [the Minister] it's fascinating that when he's at his most pompous and irritating, he has clearly bizarre ideas. I now quite regularly ask him well how will that work then and he just kind of crumples – it's wonderful – and he sort of all his pomp just evaporates in the air – it's quite er...erm... and I simply say 'no' to him as well now in a very firm voice and he just says oh all right then ... ha ha ha."

I asked him whether he thought that was him displaying leadership qualities.

Mark: "I don't know – well I think it is part of a repertoire of skills and it's to make sure you kind of ...you can see your ideas through and you don't get kind of side-tracked and...well you help him actually to see I think; that's part of leadership isn't it – it's about helping someone to see the right way forward and not to get sucked off into things that are side shows really, or distracted, or lose the core of what you are trying do, or where you're trying to get to. I can't say it always works either I mean erm ...you know we sometimes have little what we call little mind games where you try to apply blame and ... ha ha ha."

And then there is the case of Ministers disagreeing one with another. As Ian put it:

"...we are responsible for managing the business of the Civil Service and I suppose you could argue in the end ... our job is ... to make sure we deliver that effectively and there shouldn't be any tension but as you know there are sometimes tensions where, sometimes, Ministers disagree with other Ministers – you can have a lack of clarity of what the vision is in a particular area or what the line should be and you have to exercise leadership to steer a safe passage through these rocky waters."

This is becoming quite complex. The evidence suggests strongly that Ministers have a constitutional and practical leadership role, which I will call a strategic policy role. It is about deciding which policies should be introduced, and making the key decision on what the policy should be in specific operational areas. Not only is this the right and proper role for Ministers as representatives of the elected Government, but the civil service recognises this, and accepts it, as essential for the proper separation of responsibilities between Minister and the civil service. The Civil Service Code sets out in paragraph 1 "The Civil Service ... supports the Government of the day in developing and implementing its policies ..." (Code 2006).

The emergence of a Civil Service Code represented a significant step on from a widely held belief that, just as in the case of the UK constitution, the relationship between Ministers and the civil service was set by "... history ... custom and practice, the passing on of skills and habits from one generation to the next ..." (Hennessey 1989:378). As we have seen the introduction of a parallel Code for Ministers does not take this forward, because that does not define their relationship with civil servants. There have been other attempts to codify if not the relationship itself then to describe how parties should conduct themselves (see the discussion on several attempts including one by OECD in Pollitt 2003:145).

In practical terms, however, the evidence shows that the picture is more complicated. Clearly civil servants believe they have opportunities to (a) pick which Minister to deal with, (b) present arguments differently for different Ministers and (c) steer debate when Ministers disagree. All that could be presented as no more than recognising the practical constraints in moving policy forward, and no different to the considerations that would be taken into account in any situation (eg at home, or in a public company, or within the civil service itself). On the other hand, does this flexibility to manoeuvre demonstrate the civil service manipulating policy issues so as to exercise more leadership than they constitutionally have?

It is interesting to consider how the roles of minister and official are changing. In their study of public management reform Pollitt and Bourkaert (2000:137) suggest that both roles are changing, ministers' because what they do now is inherently less popular than in the 1950s and 1960s (perhaps, I suggest, because it sometimes looks now more like management than leadership) and officials', because their status in society is lessened because they are more involved in technical rather than ideological arguments (and is this also more akin to management than leadership?).

There is another issue here. It has been argued that the public management reforms of the 1980s onwards are in fact Fordist in nature which would suggest that the minister/official relationship may have evolved so much that the role of officials as the do-ers, the day-to-day managers, led by targets and management information has wrought a fundamental change that is not yet acknowledged by either ministers or civil servants (Clarke and Newman 1997:22 has a discussion on this). The introduction of bodies such as NHS Trusts forces on officials (rather than Parliament or Government) the role of manager.

A parallel question to be considered, however, is has the present organisation of the civil service understood the importance of recent changes on their role?

Conclusion

The evidence in this chapter can be summed up by two further quotes.

Ian: "... how we define leadership in terms of Ministers. I suppose in the end the key thing with Ministers is probably if they have difficult policies they want to implement ... we can at least do our best to make them workable and have to show our leadership by convincing our staff that this is where we want to go so that's where the leadership lies."

James: "I think there is a leadership role – and a leadership role for the mandarin in giving clear coherent, purposeful advice that we have to be clear what the situation is, what the issues are, what the options are so

there is a leadership role there if you like in ensuring that that's what goes erm...er..er.. to Ministers..."

It is clear that leadership in the civil service does not include making strategic policy decisions that are the responsibility of Ministers. But there is plenty of room for civil servants to exercise leadership in terms of (a) advice of all sorts, (b) modifying policy proposals, (c) putting policy decisions into effect and (d) on questions of probity and fairness.

Perhaps we should conclude by noting what Lydia had to say. She neatly encapsulated the whole picture by assigning everyone a leadership role

Lydia: "I think if we are talking about the Department for me I would look to the Permanent Secretary personally rather than to Ministers. I think Ministers are there setting the vision and I think I would expect to have a Permanent Secretary to be doing most of the leading of the Department but then within that, as you say, there are many of us who in individual roles are leaders and leading."

As with Chapters 4 and 5, these conclusions will be brought together in Chapter 7 and it is there that overall conclusions will be drawn.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusions

Introduction

This research is about how civil servants in the Department for Education and Skills make sense of the term 'leadership'. The aim is to make a contribution to academic knowledge, and to professional practice. This chapter describes how that has been achieved and discusses the contribution to knowledge and professional practice. Each of the chapters dealing with research evidence ends with a section drawing conclusions on the issues discussed. This chapter brings those points together and draws out some overarching conclusions that refer not only to leadership in the civil service but also to leadership more generally, thus making a contribution to knowledge about leadership in the civil service and to the more general literature on leadership as an aspect of organisation theory. The chapter then goes on to discuss how the conclusions make a contribution to professional practice. It is clear that research into leadership has been largely inadequate in describing how civil servants understand the term, and that there is much scope for further work on leadership as a concept, training leaders, and how civil servants inter-relate with Ministers. Nevertheless, the evidence clearly points to a model of leadership not described in the literature under review which I describe in more detail and call the Leadership Circle. Finally, I discuss briefly what other lessons I take from the research and discuss which areas are ripe for further investigation.

The conclusions reached so far

Chapter 3 compared and contrasted different leadership models with each other and with the Departmental corporate literature to see whether there was an

existing leadership approach in the academic literature that could be said to be the one that applied in the civil service. The conclusion drawn at that stage was that the transformational and path-goal approaches were closest to the discourse in the Departmental corporate material, although several other approaches overlapped with the material in some respects and no one model was clearly above the others in terms of fit.

Perhaps it is not surprising that simple models in the academic literature of what are aspects of leadership rather than full accounts of leadership in the workplace (eg Northouse 1997), fail to describe in detail what is happening on a day-to-day basis. It is more worrying that the Departmental corporate literature is similarly simplistic, although again one can understand the attraction of reducing complex behaviour to a set of easy to understand statements that can be readily communicated (DfES 2001). But it is very dangerous if corporate decisions about behaviours leading to assessments of performance, promotion and reward are not soundly based on a detailed understanding of what happens at work. To make an effective contribution to organisations' business objectives, simple ideas of this sort need to be situated in a broader, more comprehensive, framework based on what real people really do, as a result of their understanding of leadership. Otherwise, organisations risk trying to implement theoretical ideas with no reference to the day-to-day reality of the workplace, and, therefore, no reference to the reality of their workforce. That is not a recipe for success.

In Chapters 4, 5 and 6, I looked leadership as a skill, leadership and training, and leadership and Ministers respectively. These were the dominant themes that my interviewees talked about in the research. In true hermeneutic style, despite having hunches from my initial review of the literature and corporate documentation, it is the evidence that the interviewees produced that determined the direction of the thesis. I will first look at what I learnt in Chapter 4 about leadership as a skill.

First, all the interviewees thought that leadership was 'real' and had clear defining characteristics (vision etc.). No-one was awkward about using the term, and no-one suggested it shouldn't be used at all. The language was broad and sweeping but people resisted the notion that 'leadership' was clearly this thing and not that thing as if there were competing definitions from which they could choose. The evidence shows that people do have an internalised understanding that can be applied in day-to-day situations, which is sufficiently shared to permit a meaning, albeit defined in generalities, that is common in the organisation.

The shared meaning here is based on the twin ideas of 'giving direction' and 'living values' for which I used the terms 'vision' and 'motivation'. Chapter 4 unpacks these ideas and explains in detail what they meant to people, but in essence vision is about bringing ideas from several sources into a coherent, and collectively owned, whole, that would engage staff and deliver results, outcomes, that could be monitored, for example through management information. It is a complete cycle from conception to outcomes, but defined in terms of vision rather than management.

This is a fundamental issue. A narrow vision by itself, for example the desire by an individual to represent the UK at the 2012 Olympics, is laudable so far as it goes, but for an organisation such as the civil service, such a narrow statement is useless as a stand alone definition of vision in leadership. How should followers react? Whether they agree with the narrow vision or not, there is nothing there to say why the vision is appropriate, or to say how the vision could be realised. Neither is there any feedback to monitor progress or to assure achievement. This need not confuse the roles of leader and manager. Leadership does not have to be about the day-to-day detail of the journey towards the vision. But neither is leadership about setting a goal and then ignoring it until the date it is due to be reached. That is abdicating responsibility, or failing to show a necessary facet of leadership.

Similarly, none of the models of leadership in Chapter 3 took the whole picture into account, and in that very important sense they are deficient as narratives of what leadership means in the workplace. It is essential that expressions of leadership in the workplace either contain the whole cycle from conception to outcomes, or, if circumstances do not permit telling the whole story because, for example, issues about practical achievement have not yet been settled, they have clearly expressed spaces to occupy, in the whole vision, when they become available. Anything else is not leadership; it is blue sky thinking without foundations.

Motivating others is also about delivery, but it is achieved by recognising the individual subjectivity of the staff working on the vision. Whether all had the necessary skills may be uncertain, and the idea of testing the vision's robustness by removing the leader to see if motivation held up, as suggested by one person, may be adventurous, but that remains at least a conceptual check that could be applied. There was also quite a lot about how working practices could be improved in order to make motivation more certain: eg by working flexibly. This was about motivating staff to deliver by setting and living the right values to appeal to their sense of well being and belonging. There was no attempt to pretend that this was for ethical reasons alone but it was understood that behaving ethically was right and important both for social inclusion reasons and for enhanced delivery.

There is a lot written about how people react emotionally in the workplace (eg Fineman 2000) and although it was not an aspect of leadership I expected to feature strongly in this research, it was apparent that this was important. From "leadership ... is about inspiring people" (Clare) and "... what you're trying to do is to ... inspire people ..." (Martin) to Andrew's idea of the vision being a "... lode star ...", there were plenty of examples of the importance to leadership of follower subjectivity and motivation. There are similar issues in Chapter 5 about isolation and lack of confidence, which builds a picture of emotion in followers being an

important element that effective leaders must consider and get right. It is also an element for the organisation itself to consider.

The literature on leadership tends either to ignore this element (eg trait leadership) whilst the corporate literature has hints in it ("... you encourage, motivate and support people from all backgrounds ..." (DfES 2001)) but even that seems to be more about equal opportunities and managing diversity than about the subjectivity of individual workers.

This lack of appreciation of the emotional component, and especially the emotional perspective of followers, is evident from the way leadership is analysed and described in the literature. As we saw in Chapter 3, the approaches to leadership set out in Northouse (1997) fall into two broad groups, the first of which was about the leader themselves, and the second about the leader in a social context. But none of the approaches there explore in depth the potential negative emotional positions of either the leader or followers. Reicher et al (2005) do explore the relationship between leader and follower in their social identity approach to leadership but focus on the importance of shared identity between the two. This is important in considering the context for the emotional component of leadership, but there is no discussion of the consequences for leadership of isolationism and a lack of confidence in followers.

There were a number of other points that came out which build on this understanding and add colour to it. The main ones were (a) there was no belief that leadership in the civil service was materially different to leadership anywhere else, (b) that leadership was commonly most visible in crisis situations which led to a debate about whether leadership in the Department was shown only in crisis or crisis-like moments, (c) there was a consensus that leadership could be displayed by all grades, except perhaps the most junior, and was not restricted to the upper echelons, and (d) although there was a clear view that there is a distinction

between leadership and managership, this was not, in a day-to-day sense, problematic.

Each of these points is interesting and adds detail to the overall picture. People believed that leadership was a single phenomenon that exists in organisations in general; the civil service was not a special case. If that is right, then these research findings will be applicable in many organisations, not only those in the public sector.

The point about crisis leadership is one only hinted at in the literature (eg Kotter (1990), and then in a military context). The path-goal leadership approach and contingency theory (Northouse 1997) do discuss how leadership can change to suit circumstances, but the idea suggested by some interviewees was that it was only at times of crisis that leadership was apparent at all in the civil service. The implication here is leadership, for some at least, is something that can be switched on by crisis and switched off by routine. That is not something that the corporate literature recognises, nor was there a consensus that this was generally true. It remains a fascinating issue that is unresolved.

It was assumed by all (a 'taken for granted') that leadership is for everyone, or almost everyone, and thus the setting of visions and the motivation of followers is for almost all as well. There was no digging behind this 'taken for granted': it appeared to be a genuine and uncomplicated position. It raises questions about whether leadership is really the same for all grades, whether very senior or very junior, that remain unexplored.

Others have said that the debate about the difference between leadership and managership is largely fruitless (eg Pascale 1991), but the little evidence we have here is that there is a distinction and it hinges on managership being about process. But no one suggested that this was problematic. Although there is no direct evidence to support the idea it seems to me that if leadership is about vision

and motivation leading to planned outcomes then the delivery of those outcomes, the part leadership monitors but does not deliver, is the part managers control. This is also suggested by Zalesnik (1977/1992).

The second evidence chapter dealt with leadership and training, which as we saw is an aspect of leadership that the Department takes very seriously, not least in the development and introduction of the Management and Leadership Programme (MLP) and the Introduction to Leadership Programme. The evidence here was mixed. First, a recurring theme about MLP is what exactly it was about. For example, does the programme set out to 'teach' leadership? Some thought that it was supposed to do that – others said that the programme was more about self development. Similarly, the academic literature was mixed about whether 'leadership' could be taught at all.

There was an unexpected number of references to 'feeling isolated' and needing 'confidence building' which the discussion on training generated. This theme also included giving newly promoted people more support than just formal training. It appeared that some of this came as a result of coaching provided as part of MLP, which invited leaders to consider issues from others' points of view; two people said this had completely altered their approach to dealing with staff, dropping a one-size-fits-all approach and adopting an approach based on the individual's particular needs.

Training in leadership (including the coaching available) clearly had beneficial results but the evidence is that people took very different things from the training.

Chapter 6 looked at evidence about leadership and working with Ministers. Once again, there was a broad consensus about the position. It is clear that leadership in the civil service does not include making strategic policy decisions that are the responsibility of Ministers. Whatever role one ascribes to civil servants and despite the superiority that one can allow civil servants in terms of knowledge and experience (if only through longevity), there is no doubt that the large policy

decisions are made by politicians. This is both the practical position and the constitutional position, and no-one thought that especially problematic in itself.

There is plenty of room for civil servants to exercise leadership in terms of (a) advice of all sorts, (b) modifying policy proposals, (c) putting policy decisions into effect and (d) on questions of probity and fairness. So whilst Ministers take the big decisions, those decisions are often shaped by civil servants, who have both a practical and constitutional role to perform. Indeed, in influencing Ministers, civil servants can and do disagree with Ministers, and on questions of probity and fairness can insist that their advice is heeded.

The question of the changing roles of both Ministers and the civil service over recent years is discussed later on in this chapter in the section on the implications for professional practice.

This means that leadership is being exhibited in different ways in different circumstances. When a new Secretary of State takes over a department he or she inherits the decisions of their predecessor which will have had a public face (in Parliament, in government papers, in the news) and a private background, which is controlled partly by the civil service and partly by others, for example political parties and others who advise ministers. It is expected that the newcomer will want to exercise leadership at once, perhaps starting by endorsing, altering or reversing decisions made before their arrival. What is not in doubt is that Ministers have the right to do just that, and the civil service's role is to advise, and then to put into practice the new policies. But ministers cannot take all decisions and having set the vision politically at a strategic level, they leave plenty of room for the civil service to show leadership. There is a dynamic and a tension about this arrangement which makes working with ministers by turns infuriating and very exciting. A senior civil servant is tantalysingly close to real power and authority knowing that it will forever remain just out of reach.

Overall conclusions

By bringing together the conclusions drawn from the literature in Chapter 3 and from research in Chapter 4 a new model of leadership in the civil service can be suggested. The model is set out later in this chapter. But let us trace the argument through. From the academic and corporate literature it seemed likely that the transformational and path-goal approaches were closest to how leadership in the civil service worked. Let's start with the latter approach first as it seems a reasonable fit with the evidence.

In the path-goal approach, the leader uses a variety of tactics (for example, directive, supportive, participative) depending on the situation, to enhance "... employee performance and employee satisfaction by focusing on employee motivation" (Northouse 1997:88). The underlying problem is that the theory expects people to behave rationally (which is how motivation was thought to work in the early 1970s when this theory emerged) and it "... underestimated the importance of emotional and non-conscious efforts of members of social groups and the symbolic significance of leader behaviours" (Rickards and Clark 2006:83). So the theory invites leaders to react to the situation but not to the individual (for example, you need to be supportive when the work is undemanding; or directive when the work is unstructured, regardless of the individual concerned who may not mind undemanding work, or may relish the freedom given by a lack of structure). This contrasts starkly with the evidence in the interviews. We have seen how some interviewees have said that learning to deal with staff as individuals with differing needs regardless of the situation, has enhanced their performance as leaders. None of the interview data suggested that civil servants tended to react to the situation alone with no thought for the individual. So a key component of the path-goal approach is missing.

There were also echoes of transformational approaches in the data, but once again little evidence of the core component of the approach, which is about changing,

transforming, followers. But other important aspects, "... values, ethics, standards and long-term goals ..." (Northouse 1997:130) were present. It is possible to see transactional leadership at work in the civil service ('if you achieve this objective it will help you win this bonus'), and transformational leadership (the Department's behaviours suggest that people should change to fit the behaviours required) and perhaps charismatic leadership as well (as Mark said in Chapter 4 "... it's taken someone like [Director] to bring a sense of direction and clarity ..."), but the overwhelming sense in the evidence is not of transformation of followers but of delivering the outcomes required by being, amongst other things, sensitive to the needs of individual followers rather than by transforming them.

It is possible to argue that the Management and Leadership Programme and the Professional Skills for Government programme are transformational, at least to the extent that they aim to improve performance. And as they are frameworks within which many solutions (training courses, mentoring, job changes etc) could be applied to suit individuals' needs, they do not exclude transformation. But that is not what transformational leadership as described by Northouse is all about; for him transformation includes an ethical change in both leader and follower. To go further, McAuley et al (2007: 403) discuss how parallels between transformational leadership and cults or religions can be discerned.

So what we have here doesn't fit either of the two leadership approaches that were the best fit with the corporate literature. One conclusion that suggests itself is that the academic models described by Northouse and others are interesting and useful analytical tools but cannot by themselves describe what is happening in professional day-to-day situations; no-one is only and always a transactional leader for example. This is underpinned by the assertion in Chapter 3 that leadership models tend to come into and fall out of fashion; this is more fundamental than models evolving and being updated, they become superseded.

They may, in the case of the civil service, have become superseded not only in the sense of time marching on or new theories and in-sights coming to the fore, but as a direct consequence of fundamental changes in the service introduced in the Thatcher years, the 1980s. The advent of new public management in the public sector led to many significant changes, for example "... new organizational forms, roles and cultures emerged" (Ferlie et al (1996: 1)) which have impacted significantly on both civil servants and government ministers (see Chapter 6). That may have been enough to shift leadership in the civil service quite a distance from the models of leadership in the literature.

But even allowing for all that, the question of delivering outcomes is omitted from leadership models. The Government's own PIU report doesn't have achievement of delivery objectives in their list of leadership behaviours in action (PIU 2000)) and thus that isn't a factor in discussing there why one model of leadership may be more effective than another. For example, one question is that is important but overlooked is, if transactional, transformational and charismatic leadership form a loose continuum along which a leader might travel (Rickards and Clark 2006: 79 et seq doesn't go quite that far although they do discuss all three together) then how does stopping off at different points affect the delivery of outcomes? This surely is a matter of central importance. Or are we so transfixed by the question of leadership that we look only at leaders and sometimes at followers and not at results obtained by them?

One of the interesting aspects is that the outcomes required are generally delivered not by civil servants themselves but by others in a variety of relationships with Government, for example schools, colleges and universities. As we saw in Chapter 4, this requires influencing skills in civil service leaders. This is not changed by findings from other chapters. Views about training do not affect this and nor do the complications of the Ministerial dimension. So we can conclude that whilst there is a consensus in the data evidence about leadership in the civil service, we can't fit that view into a known model of leadership. Path-goal and

transformational theories cover some of the ground but important elements are missing, in particular, the subjectivity of followers in the former and the essential symbiotic bi-lateral change requirement of the latter. Crucially, neither extends to close the circle from vision to outcome and neither discusses delivering the outcomes through a third party organisation.

As a consequence, existing models, whilst providing useful analytical tools, cannot help us understand how leadership in the civil service operates in a practical sense, and a new, more comprehensive, model is required.

New model of leadership – the Leadership Circle

The evidence from the interview data is quite clear. Leadership starts with vision, either from one source or more likely from several, including ministers and external advisers and pressure groups. That vision must be clearly articulated so as to provide the basis for the motivation of followers, not only those in the civil service but in delivery partners as well, who will go on to achieve the result required. This vision must be implemented to provide the motivation needed to ensure its delivery. The very acts of interpretation and communication are fraught, of course, with the problems of a dominant discourse driving out alternatives and the imposition of that discourse to the exclusion of the ideal speech moment. This is a complex area where leaders must recognise the individual subjectivity of those involved and not adopt a single approach either through laziness or through a belief that the prevailing situation alone dictates how to act. Neither can a leader relax at this point. Whilst the activity may be elsewhere in followers, and in delivery partners, leaders must continue to monitor progress and inject leadership (ie. in terms of vision, motivation, and the expression of outcomes) to ensure the required results are achieved.

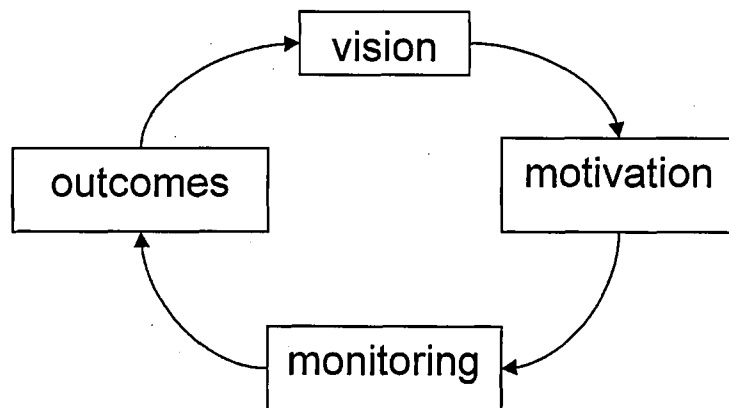


Fig 1: The Leadership Circle

It is possible to reduce this complexity to a simple diagram, depicting a circle; vision to motivation to monitoring to outcomes, which can then lead to a new vision. There are dangers of reducing this model to a simple diagrammatic representation that comes out in a neat, four part, circle that appears to mimic the Kolb learning circle or the Boston matrix. It seriously underplays the complex interactions that can arise in day-to-day life, it wrongly suggests that there is a single, and sequential, pathway from start to finish and because it looks simple it implies that the model can be easily described and just as easily operated. These are all serious objections, but the value in having an uncomplicated diagram is that it shows plainly and unequivocally that this model of leadership is much more than just setting a vision and guiding followers so that they reach the vision. The monitoring and outcomes components are crucial if the leadership function is to deliver worthwhile and lasting change. In considering that, followers play a critical part in the success of the leader and thus the success of leadership, and the interaction between the two is a fundamental part of achievement (see Reicher et al (2007)).

One feature of the model that is missed by the diagram is the real life complication of moving back and forth from one element of leadership to another in a flexible manner. There is no reason to stick rigidly to the sequence in the model, and

some good reasons why an effective leader must be sufficiently alert to move about from one part of the leadership circle to another. Monitoring in its widest sense might come anywhere, and certainly a manager would monitor and evaluate progress towards outcomes. An effective leader who wanted to retain the motivation of their staff and build on experience to steer them in setting up new visions would need to know a lot about the whole process so monitoring is important throughout. This would be essential not least for the rewarding of followers and for their development and progression in the organisation (see Carter and Jackson (1994: 89)).

So it is with some trepidation that I offer the diagram as an aid to understanding rather than a complete description. The key to the Leadership Circle is the need to go beyond vision and the encouragement of followers to deliver results by an additional focus on monitoring and achieving results.

Consequences for professional practice

Each of the three evidence chapters has a lesson for professional practice which I discuss in more detail below. The three lessons are (a) leadership models in the academic literature reviewed here are insufficient to describe how leadership is understood in the work environment so HR practices shouldn't be based on them, (b) training for leadership is problematic and leaders are insufficiently supported in day-to-day roles, and (c) the role of Ministers and civil servants has changed markedly over the last 30 years or so and there is significant doubt that this has been reflected in the way those roles are performed.

The first lesson is about models of leadership. This research suggests that anyone seeking to develop professional practice in leadership in the civil service, either from an academic or practical point of view, should look beyond the existing literature. There is insufficient discussion of why leadership is required at all (many books have case studies, for example Rickards and Clark 2006), but all too

often there is an assumption that leadership as understood in the academic literature is de facto a good and necessary thing. Human relations managers seeking to develop or improve leadership skills in the civil service shouldn't worry overmuch about whether one model or another in the literature is the right one to embrace; indeed embracing any old model as the 'right one' will mislead. But there is a theme that can be relied upon, the leadership circle of vision and motivation, followed by monitoring progress and achieving the desired outcomes, often through third parties. That is what people recognise as leadership and how leadership in the civil service looks to civil servants. If employers are basing promotion and reward packages on academic models, as might be supposed from the PIU report (PIU 2000) for example, then there is a serious risk that those packages are not rewarding practice that gets the best outcomes and that leaders' behaviour is thus skewed away from what works best and what they understand as leadership in a practical environment.

Second, training on the Management and Leadership Programme has been well received and the coaching has been a crucial part of that; but the support for newly promoted and existing civil servants needs to be reviewed with an emphasis on increasing confidence and reducing the likelihood of isolation. So far as training leaders is concerned the big lessons for professional practice are about understanding what we are trying to teach in formal programmes, and making sure we believe those things are teachable at all; and accepting that formal programmes can only go so far and will be received positively by only a proportion of the participants. There is a clear consensus that continuing support is necessary, especially for newly promoted leaders, and that low self confidence and feelings of isolation were common. There was a 'sink-or-swim' mentality about the way the Department treated leaders that some felt undermined them. The whole package of training and support had significant gaps.

Third, the need to consider whether the fundamental changes in the roles of Ministers and the Civil Service over the last thirty years have been sufficiently

understood and adequate training and support for both provided. The issues arising from the interface between civil servants and Ministers are as much constitutional as practical. Despite the Codes issued by the Cabinet Office people felt there was scope to do more to make sure the interface was effective. One idea discussed is about making the relationship much more formal, by turning the civil service into, as Clare put it, 'a profession'. But as Hennessy (1989:378) reminds us the relationship between civil servants and Ministers, like the UK constitution itself, is set by "... history ... custom and practice ...". This may not matter if the relationship continues to evolve slowly but as we have seen in Chapter 6 there are serious questions about managerialisation in the 1980s and the significant change in roles for both Ministers and civil servants. Are both groups aware of the changes and fully skilled in leading in the new environment?

Taken as a whole, therefore, professional practice, both in the civil service and elsewhere, would benefit from a fundamental change in emphasis on leadership by bringing in the critical aspect of achieving planned outcomes and the steps to get there. For example, in terms of recognition and reward, leadership should be assessed in terms of achievement but in making that assessment the steps towards achievement should also be considered. The argument here is that without a shared vision, the successful subjective motivation of followers, and monitoring of progress, achievement will either fail or risk being seriously flawed. A successful leader will need to excel in all aspects and should not be judged on results alone, for which achievement, responsibility will lie in many places. A successful leader cannot do it all by themselves.

Limitations and future research

I have already noted some areas for future research, for example crisis leadership, emotions in followers, leadership for all rather than just the top echelons. In addition I was surprised that very little was made about gender issues. One person mentioned an improving situation on equality and diversity issues, but

otherwise the evidence suggests that these considerations just aren't in people's minds, despite the fact that the civil service, in common with most organisations, has comparatively few women and people from ethnic minorities in the most senior positions. Why this was not raised more often is not something I considered in this research. There is plenty more to research in this field.

Personal reflexions

When you are concentrating on day-to-day work you don't often pause to think, 'aha! That was an example of transactional leadership', or, 'if only Jim had used path-goal theory there he'd have got the results he want more quickly'. It is something of a luxury therefore to be able, over a six year period, to step back and think about how leadership plays out in one's place of work. It is a greater luxury when others give up their valuable time to talk to you about leadership. I was not surprised that they did but I was grateful for the insightful comments that were made, comments that showed me that people do, when asked, stop and think about their leadership styles, do, generally, welcome training and take it seriously and do think about how best to work with Ministers.

In fact they think about it so much, that I was surprised, on reflexion, that that was not more noticeable in day-to-day work. There is a tendency in the civil service to regard academic study as very worthy for others (for example the Government wants half the population to have access to higher education, but this is more for economic reasons than for academic excellence in itself), but not always relevant to professional practice. But I now wonder if this isn't an example of the Abilene Paradox (Harvey 1988) in which we all agree with something (for example that academic study is not all that relevant to professional practice) because people are fearful to voice their disagreement. There is no shortage of highly qualified civil servants (MBAs and PhDs are not rare) but no evidence that their academic expertise is widely used.

But then, if academic leadership theory is, as I suggest, not very useful in analysing leadership in professional practice, perhaps it isn't surprising that the Department gives it little room.

One might expect conducting research in one's own organisation, research that could be critical of one's colleagues, or the culture of the organisation, might be problematic. In some ways it was. There was first of all the consideration of time spent in both interviews and wider research, but apart from the interviews and their transcription, everything was done in my own time. After gaining permission from the Department to conduct the interviews there were no problems about going ahead with them and no-one raised any sort of doubt about the value of what I was doing, or the propriety of the way I did it. So interviewing people in their own offices or elsewhere in the Department, and tape recording the conversations, was without difficulty. Of course, many of those I spoke to would themselves probably have conducted research either in their own studies at university or on official business, and all would have used research for evidence based policy making. So there is unlikely to have been any one involved for whom the idea of research was novel, or problematic.

Nor was there any problem about anonymity for the interviewees. All were clear that that was the only course to pursue and no-one suggested any other way of proceeding. Nor was there any clamour to know who else was being interviewed, nor any request, not even tangentially, to see all or part of the transcript of their interview, or any part of the completed thesis in order to check or edit their data. There appears to have been complete professional trust between researcher and interviewees, doubtless helped in part because the researcher was known personally by each interviewee.

Which bring us to one clear issue for the researcher. In Chapter 1 I set out the acknowledged subjective background to the research. I was not only known to the interviewees, but well known to some, and had been for some years. This, I think,

was a double edged sword. It undoubtedly gave me easy and perhaps privileged access to the group I wanted to interview. It almost certainly put the interviewees at ease and perhaps allowed them to be franker than they would have been with someone they'd not met before. Would that, however, encourage them to spice up their comments, to exaggerate points they wanted to make, or drop their guard against making suggestions that could barely be substantiated?

The other edge to the sword is a counter-balance to that risk; familiarity might encourage freedom in speech and access to richer and more interesting data. It could be that familiarity allowed me to gather data that others might not have gathered, and that an external and unfamiliar researcher might have taken longer than me to get to a position of understanding, or not reached that position at all. As I said in Chapter 2, having noted the necessary considerations that a subjective critical theory approach requires (for example, that the researcher's own pre-understandings are a feature of the research and must be acknowledged), then so long as the data points convincingly in a certain direction (or directions) then that is sufficient to allow the researcher to reach conclusions.

There is neither any point trying to guess how my relationship with the interviewees might have coloured their conversations with me, nor any need. Once one has set out the ontological and epistemological basis of the research, and acknowledged the subjectivity in it (Chapter 2), then the data must be allowed to stand for itself and be viewed in the appropriate light. However, away from that formal position, I have little doubt that the interviewees would stand by what they told me and that any professional researcher could have obtained very similar data.

I have been reflecting on what it meant to research in a critical theory mode whilst working day-to-day in the same environment as my interviewees. I have already explained (Chapter 2) why I decided to restrict my research to interviews. I think it would have been difficult to maintain wholly normal working relations with my

colleagues if they felt that they were being observed, for example in the weekly senior management meetings, as part of my research. It would have additionally complex if, as was the case, some in those meetings had been interviewed and some had not (and thus there would have been an in-group and an out-group with real or imagined consequences). But I did find that, as a result of my studies, I began to consider not only what my colleagues were saying (the words they used) but also the meanings I thought they wanted to convey (based on an attempt to understand their less dominant discourses).

And that, of course, is a key issue in critical theory: communications are distorted favouring one discourse over another which leads to a diminution in democracy and fairness. If by finding consensus we can remove that unfairness then we have improved society or in this case the workplace. It is possible to believe that by trying to hear more than just the words people use but also trying to expose their alternative discourses then the chances of reaching that consensus are greater. This is not without difficulty. What chairman of the weekly senior management team wants to hear multiple stories, wholly or partly conflicting with each other and with the dominant discourse? So to make progress in a constructive way, this task must be sensitively managed, and part of that task is to help others understand the underlying epistemology – no easy thing. I find that short sharp interventions in formal meetings, which can be dealt with quickly and if necessary rejected with out undue distraction, backed up with longer, often one-to-one, discussions with individuals to coach them in thinking about the lessons that can be learnt from a critical approach, work best.

But, of course, I am offering my own discourse, which others may quite easily see as dominant and driving out other, equally appropriate, discourses. In the end it is the elusive ideal speech moment that theory says we should seek.

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Civil servants and leadership interviews – key questions

- 1 Interviewees background (length of service, responsibilities, grade)
- 2 What is leadership in the civil service for you?
- 3 Has it been the same over the last 5/10/20/30 years?
- 4 What makes a good leader?
- 5 Is a good leader in the civil service the same as a good leader in general?
- 6 For you, any difference between leaders and managers?
- 7 Conflict between Ministers and bosses as leaders?
- 8 Have you done any leadership training? Did it help? Why?
- 9 Can anyone be a leader? Does grade or experience matter?
- 10 Are your subordinates leaders? How do you help them develop their leadership skills?
- 11 Does 'the system' help or hinder you as a leader?
- 12 Any room for mavericks? cf 'leader and the fool'?