

Virtual Staff College Leadership Provision for Directors of Children's Services

Systems leadership for effective services

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1. Introduction

This brief thinkpiece summarises the key features of a model of leadership that is increasingly being accepted as the most appropriate way of describing what Directors of Children's Services in England do when they are at their most effective. Termed 'systems leadership', it echoes the way in which school leadership is being reconstructed by thinkers such as David Hargreaves who writes about headteachers as 'system leaders'¹, and it matches the increasing emphasis in the health service on 'collaborative leadership'. What all three have in common is that they replace the traditional notion of the leader as the sole source of power and authority, with a version of leadership which reflects the complexity of modern society and the decline of deference, a position argued strongly by Margaret Wheatley who suggests that 'in these troubled, uncertain times, we don't need more command and control, we need better means to engage everyone's intelligence in solving challenges and crises as they arise'². Systems leadership is a marker of the more general shift in modes of transmission from hierarchical to viral, and, in forms of social organisation, from analogue to digital. Arguably, it is the only kind of leadership likely to survive the advent of social media.

1. 'Creating a self-improving school system' by David Hargreaves, The National College (2010)

2. 'Finding our way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time' by Margaret J Wheatley, Berrett-Koehler (2005)

2. Service delivery

Public services are no longer provided by simple organisations that can deliver at the press of a button, and service improvement can no longer be achieved by compliance with a set of rules, however skillfully devised. Complex times call for a more sophisticated approach which recognises that the public is less tolerant and more demanding than ever before and that, increasingly, there are multiple sources of authority for the delivery of public services. The modern leader has to acknowledge that purpose is no longer self evident, that permission to act has to be earned, and that the resources to deliver will always be conditional upon the local and national political context.

This more complex view of leadership in the public sector is most cogently described in Mark Moore's strategic triangle³ which identifies three elements that are at the heart of achieving "improved results" or, in the case of children's services, 'better outcomes for children and young people'. Moore argues that only when all three are aligned is it possible to make effective progress. The three elements of Mark Moore's model are:

- Public value proposition (an unambiguous and shared sense of purpose)
- Authorising environment (permission to exercise leadership)
- Operating capacity (the means to deliver)

Mark Moore's strategic triangle

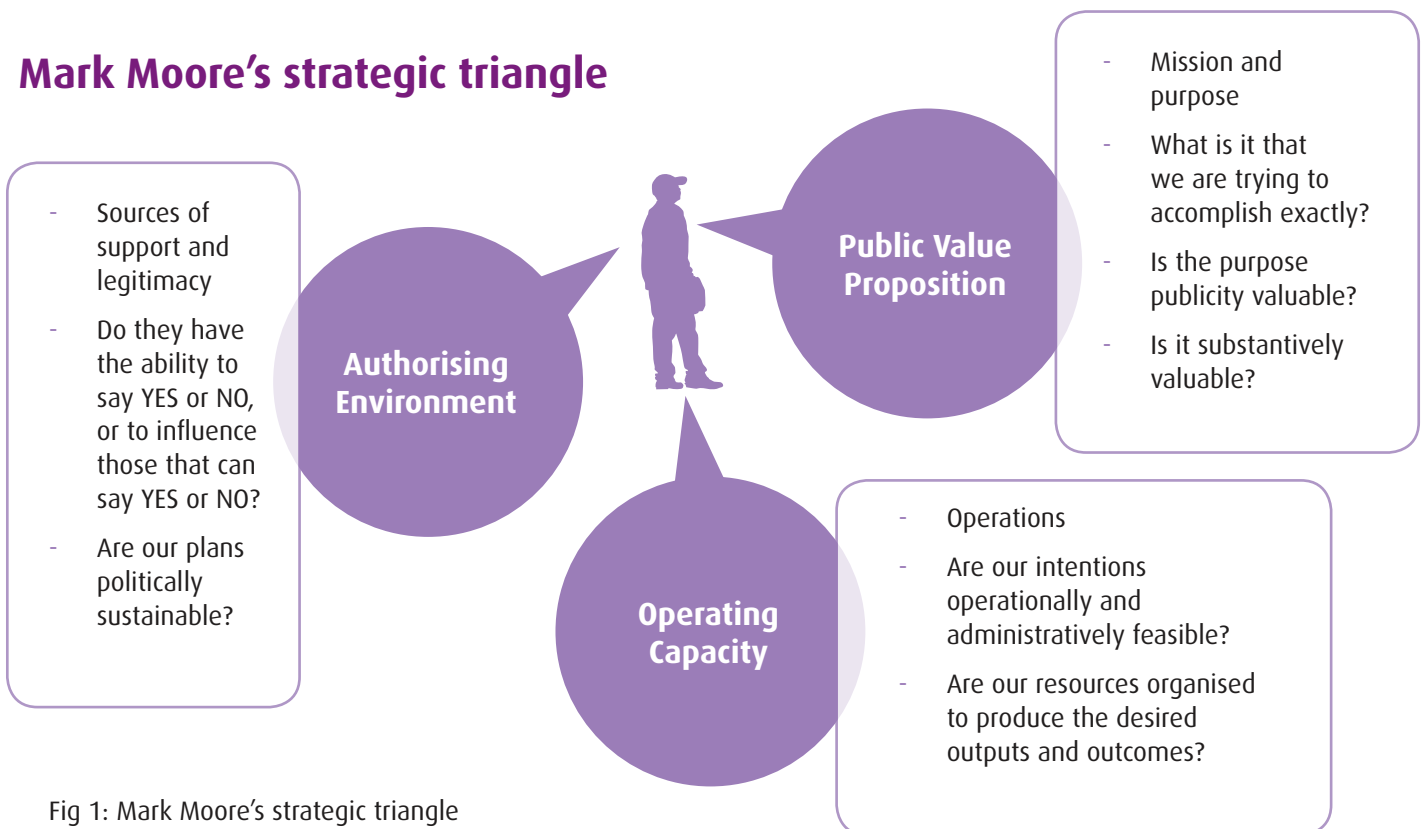


Fig 1: Mark Moore's strategic triangle

3. 'Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government' by Mark Moore, Harvard University Press (1995)

3. Service Improvement

If service delivery is about more than good line management, then service improvement requires more than faithful compliance with a set of standard operating procedures. Organisational improvement in a complex world relies as much on having the right cultural context or institutional frame of mind as on finding the right solution to a particular challenge. As policy makers are finding from grand initiatives like the national strategies for literacy and numeracy in England, there is no holy grail and success will not be achieved by efforts to eliminate human error as all-purpose strategies are 'rolled out' of the national policy laboratory. There is little evidence that just because a particular approach can be shown to have worked in one setting, it will inevitably work everywhere else, but this 'one size fits all' approach has become one of the sacred cows of recent attempts to 'modernise' the public sector, particularly in England.

A more sophisticated model of service improvement, consistent with the notion of systems leadership, is provided by *implementation science*, an approach which is about implementing evidence based programmes with integrity. Implementation science acknowledges that there is more to evidence based practice than simply replicating what has happened in a successful pilot scheme or research study. It argues that context is a critical component of success, and identifies three aspects of the context that are particularly important:

- Systems
- Workforce
- Leadership

The way in which these relate to each other is illustrated in figure 2.



Fig 2: Towards excellence in children's services: an implementation model.

What this model acknowledges, like the model of leadership in Mark Moore's strategic triangle, is that context is all-important. Implementation science draws attention not only to the evidence of what works in terms of service content, but also to what the evidence has to say about effective delivery and appropriate service and systems re-engineering. What's more, the evidence itself is a resource. It is not, in other words, a source of enduring wisdom, a blueprint for implementation, but an additional item in the toolbox, to be used intelligently in the light of circumstance.

That is why it is important to stress that implementation science is not a counsel of perfection. It allows for flexible application, and acknowledges that the factors that need to be appropriately aligned to achieve success are integrated and compensatory. In other words, the intelligent leader can make sure that weaknesses in one organisational area are compensated for by strengths in another thus achieving a balanced approach to improvement.

None of the three elements in this model take precedence. If individual systems are inhospitable to improvements and innovations, then little will happen, and because systems are established by leaders and implemented by people, all three have to be simultaneously addressed. For all practical purposes, however, the single feature that that is most likely to trigger change most rapidly across the system as a whole is a new approach to leadership.

4. Systems leadership

Systems leadership is not just a variation on what has obtained in the past, it is different in kind. However nostalgic the public may be for old certainties, the reality is that, when faced with authoritarian behaviour that does not suit them, they tend to reject it and, without a concept such as systems leadership, it is very hard to describe an alternative.

However, systems leadership is not easily defined. It is not actually as much of a novelty as is implied in the introduction to this piece. It has a history, grounded in reputable intellectual enquiry, on the basis of which it has gained currency over the last 20 years as a way of describing the kind of leadership that derives from systems thinking. Systems thinking, or ‘whole systems thinking’, as it is perhaps more appropriately termed, is the belief that that the component parts of a system can best be understood ‘in the context of their relationship with each other and with other systems, rather than in isolation’.

The starting point for this approach, reiterated by many of the most influential leadership theorists is that the world has now become a far more complicated place than once it was. Margaret Wheatley puts it like this:

‘In this world of rapid, complex change, no one can really know the future and lead others there. An individual leader can’t neatly choose the right outcome and chart a course alone, because there are too many unpredictable variables in the mix. We need a new model of leadership, which we call Whole Systems Leadership’⁴.

A similar point is made by Michael Barber, familiar to many as the architect of a number of the educational reforms introduced by the Labour Government in England during the late 1990s and early 2000s:

‘In 2012 we know that leadership, even in the most centralised societies is too dispersed, information flows too global, the speed from thought to action too fast for the massive problems of the 21st century to be resolved behind closed doors, however, beautiful the location. Instead leaders need to focus on creating the conditions in which

the necessary innovations can take place and in which countless individuals with leadership responsibilities are well-educated enough to make good decisions’⁵.

Whole systems thinking is sometimes justified by reference to *complexity science* which is the study of complex adaptive systems in the natural world. There is some dispute about whether or not it is appropriate to derive insights about social phenomena in this way. But even though it has been dubbed ‘pseudo science’ by some⁶, the attempt to validate systems thinking in this way has provided a rich seam of metaphors from quantum physics and evolutionary biology to help explain how organisations work in the modern world.

The lessons that are most commonly drawn from complexity science are that phenomena of any kind (natural or social) cannot be detached from their context, that things exist through their relationships with each other rather than in isolation, and that (as in the natural world) you can have order without control. This last point is very important. Complexity science suggests that once systems have been established, they will continue to operate in an orderly fashion without any external guiding hand.

This way of thinking will be most familiar to senior leaders in children’s services from *The Munro Review of Child Protection – Part One: A Systems Analysis published in 2011*. This was the initial report from the Munro committee in which Eileen Munro outlined the methodology she was using to analyse ‘how aspects of the system interact with each other’, and the way in which this has resulted in ‘unexpected consequences’ for the processes and procedures used to safeguard children and young people. In particular she draws a distinction between ‘single loop learning’ (*Are we doing what is specified?*) and ‘double loop learning’ (*Have we specified the right thing to do?*) which she describes as a ‘broader, more reflective learning approach that is a characteristic of holistic thinking’.

The key point she makes is that, whether leaders like it or not, systems have a life of their own, which develops in response to the environment in which they find

4. ‘Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World’, by Margaret J Wheatley, Berrett-Koehler (1992, re-issued 2006)

5. ‘Oceans of innovation: The Atlantic, the Pacific, global leadership and the future of education’ by Michael Barber, Katelyn Donnelly and Saad Rizvi, IPPR (2012)

6. ‘What Is Complexity Science, Really?’ by Steven E. Phelan from ‘Emergence’ (2001)

themselves. That is why national policy prescriptions are frequently plagued by unintended consequences.

At the most senior level, there is a tendency to imagine that organisations are entirely compliant and once statutory regulation is in place everything else follows as a matter of course. That may be true of simple systems, operating on a small scale, but in a complex system, like that required for the safeguarding of children and young people, the reality is quite different. Any complex system learns and adapts to its environment in ways that can't easily be anticipated because change happens independently of the intentions that informed its original design.

Systems leadership acknowledges all of this, and proposes a different approach. A paper commissioned by The King's Fund in preparation for the changes to the health service⁷, explores leadership, management and administration in the NHS which, it argues, is over-administered, but under-led. 'The simple message that management is about control while leadership is about influence becomes supremely important as we explore more deeply the different demands of increasingly complex systems'.

A similar point is made by Margaret Wheatley, who also cites complexity science as a major influence. In an essay titled 'Goodbye, command and control'⁸ she argues that 'we still think of organisations in mechanistic terms, as collections of replaceable parts capable of being reengineered. We act as if even people were machines, redesigning their jobs as we would prepare an engineering diagram, expecting them to perform to specifications with machine-like obedience'.

Margaret Wheatley describes the kind of leadership that is based on free-flowing information, individual empowerment, relationship networks, and organisational change that evolves organically. Similarly, Adam Kahane, a leading organiser, designer and facilitator of processes through which business, government, and civil society leaders can work together to address their toughest challenges, describes an approach to leadership that is:

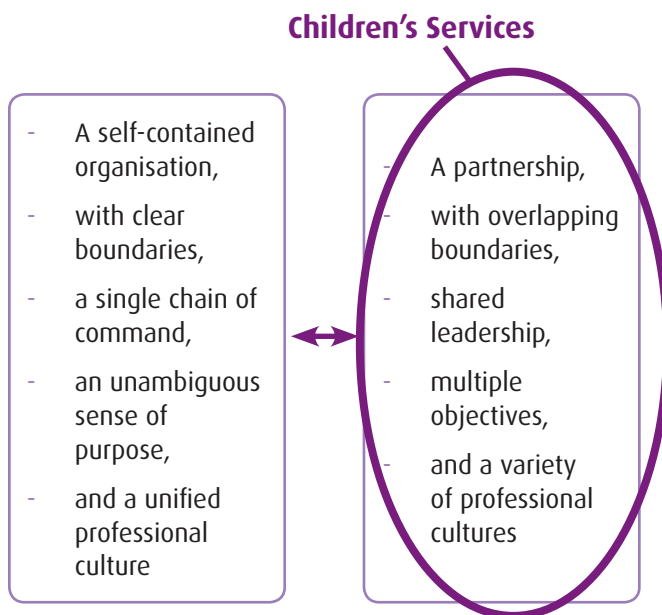
- Systemic - not piecemeal or divided into isolated silos,
- Participative - involving many people's ideas, energy, talent, and expertise,
- Emergent - able to move and adapt nimbly in a minefield of uncertainty⁹

7. 'Leadership of Whole Systems' by David Welbourn, Rob Warwick, Colin Carnall and Dean Fathers (Kings Fund, 2012)

8. 'Goodbye, command and control' by Wheatley, M.J. (1997)

9. 'Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities' by Adam Kahane, Berrett-Koehler (2004)

For all of these reasons, this way of thinking offers a helpful model of the kind of leadership required by any organisation in the public sector, whether it is a single, tightly knit organisation with a clear, unambiguous sense of purpose, such as a school, or a wide-ranging partnership with multiple objectives, such as a health and well-being board in which much of the leadership required is 'without authority'. Whilst there is nothing exclusive to children's services about the term systems leadership, the Director of Children's Services does have to operate in an unusually complex and uncertain environment which is at one end of the spectrum:



It is worth adding that, with the advent of sector led improvement in children's services in England, the term 'systems leadership' is also being used to describe the kind of leadership that is required to operate not only across cultural boundaries, but also across geographical boundaries. Although the similarities are strong enough to justify grouping both kinds of leadership under a single heading, the differences are, nonetheless, significant.

Systems leadership across cultural boundaries is about aligning vision and purpose across different organisations whilst respecting professional difference. Systems leadership across local authority boundaries is about working with other organisations to renew vision and purpose by challenging professional difference.

5. What do systems leaders do?

One of the merits of the paper published by the King's Fund on 'Leadership of Whole Systems' is that it seeks to make the difficult transition from matters of high principle to more practical considerations about how leaders should lead in the real world. The authors arrive at seven 'guiding messages to leaders':

- go out of your way to make new connections,
- adopt an open, enquiring mindset, refusing to be constrained by current horizons,
- embrace uncertainty and be positive about change – adopt an entrepreneurial attitude,
- draw on as many different perspectives as possible; diversity is non-optional,
- ensure leadership and decision-making are distributed throughout all levels and functions,
- establish a compelling vision which is shared by all partners in the whole system,
- promote the importance of values – invest as much energy into relationships and behaviours as into delivering tasks.

They conclude with the hope that 'this work provides inspiration for people to embrace complexity and uncertainty as the opportunity to trigger new ways of viewing the requirements of leadership. Traditional competence-based leadership development will not hack it in this world of surprises, paradoxes and absurdities. However, a new mindset has every chance of powering whole systems to unpredictable success, potentially with greater satisfaction and ownership distributed in the most unlikely of stakeholders'.

This prescription mirrors the research into aspects of systems leadership commissioned by the National College and the Virtual Staff College. Some important descriptions of what systems leadership looks like in practice are included in 'The Resourceful leader' (National College, 2010), its more recent companion piece 'Leading for learning: How the intelligent leader builds capacity' (National College and VSC, 2012) and in 'Leading for improvement in children's services: a maturity model' published by the VSC (2012).

These publications all emphasise aspects of leadership that are about:

- leading 'without authority', relying on influence rather than position,
- being driven by a sense of moral purpose, motivated by a clear value system rather than the need to exercise power or generate profit,
- distributing leadership beyond a tightly knit senior leadership team in order to encourage as many people as possible to take responsibility and generate innovative solutions,
- building systems and processes which encourage intelligence to flow horizontally (between peers) as well as vertically (up and down a hierarchy),
- putting coaching and mentoring at the heart of line management arrangements,
- establishing a learning culture, which is tolerant of conscientious error, open to possibilities, and constantly changing in response to experience,
- developing a skilled, rather than compliant, workforce by managing talent and promoting initiative.



6. What attributes and skills do systems leaders require?

Systems leadership not only requires leaders to do different things, but it also requires a different style of leadership. The effective systems leader needs to have a set of skills and attributes that may not be within the grasp of more conventional or traditional leaders, buttressed as they are by the security of positional power.

The implications of all this for the way in which Directors of Children's Services understand and discharge their role as senior leaders are profound, and potentially quite uncomfortable, particularly if the local authority chief executive and elected members see it differently. The ways in which systems leadership challenges the traditional role of the local authority chief officer can be summed up under two headings.

Role and purpose

If the DCS is, first and foremost, a champion for children and young people, they may, at times, find themselves in conflict not only with senior colleagues in the local authority, but also with local politicians, and with others providing services for children and young people *including their own staff*. If they go one step further, and see themselves as having a primary responsibility for identifying poor performance without being deterred by the risk of public criticism, then they will almost certainly, from time to time, find themselves in a difficult position.

Rather than retreating from the challenge, astute leaders will manage the situation honestly. The watchwords of this kind of leadership are:

- an uncompromising commitment to a sense of public value and moral purpose,
- the importance of building personal resilience *throughout the organisation*,
- an unwillingness to settle for anything less than the highest quality of provision,
- confidence about outcomes, and ambition for the wider community.

Personal agency

With systems leadership comes a renewed emphasis on the ability of the leader to influence events by force of personality. A distinction should be drawn between the old fashioned notion of the domineering leader, whose power comes from their willingness to coerce others, and the requirement on a modern leader to be a member of a team, making their presence felt by their ability to achieve a collective sense of purpose.

The key features of this are:

- a sense of what it means to have impact without marginalising other people,
- the ability to create a compelling narrative, which is engaging and inspirational,
- the kind of creativity that generates innovative solutions to intractable problems.

It follows that the most highly skilled systems leader is able to balance two different kinds of leadership in creative tension. On the one hand they will be 'on the dance floor', embodying the organisation that they lead, supporting their staff, and being an advocate for the services they provide. On the other, they will be 'on the balcony', a leading critic of the organisation for which they are responsible, and challenging the way in which it does business¹⁰. For many, both the leaders and those who follow, this will be an unfamiliar combination, but it is essential for the establishment of high quality services in the public sector that are capable of self improvement.

10. For a fuller discussion of the metaphor of the 'balcony' and the 'dance floor' as a way of thinking about adaptive leadership, see 'Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading', Heifetz and Linsky, Harvard University Press (2002)

7. What next?

This thinkpiece is derived from a number of sources. Its genesis lay in discussions between Patrick Scott and Anton Florek on behalf of the VSC, and John Harris, on behalf of the CIB. It draws, however, on a much wider range of views, including published research (from the National College for School Leadership, the Virtual Staff College and the King's Fund), policy papers generated by the VSC succession planning initiative, and discussions with DCSs, most notably at an Applied Leadership Seminar at Nottingham on Sector Led Improvement in April 2012.

It is intended as a contribution towards wider discussions within the sector and beyond about the nature of leadership in the public sector and as one of a number of source documents for the research into 'systems leadership' commissioned by the VSC from the Colebrook Institute.

Three questions are proposed for further discussion:

- How important is leadership, and what kind of leadership is important, in improving practice?
- What do leaders need to know in order to be able to assess impact and improve outcomes?
- How can the system learn from experience, and what is the role of leadership in making this happen?



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