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Exploring Leadership in Multi-sectoral Partnerships

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Abstract

This paper explores some critical aspects of leadership in the context of multi-sectoral partnerships. It focuses on leadership in practice and asks the question "How do managers experience and perceive leadership in such partnerships?" The study contributes to the debate on whether leadership in a multi-sectoral partnership context differs from that within a single organisation. It is based on the accounts of practising managers working in complex partnerships. The paper highlights a number of leadership challenges faced by those working in multi-sectoral partnerships. Partnership practitioners were clear that leadership in partnerships was more complex than in single organisations. However, it was more difficult for them to agree a consensus on the essential nature of leadership in partnership. We suggest a first, second and third person approach might be a way of better interpreting leadership in the context of partnerships.

Key words: Multi-sectoral Partnerships, Leadership Theory and Practice

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Introduction

Partnership and collaborative activity can be witnessed across the board in all sectors: public, voluntary and private (Grice, 2001; Wilson and Charlton, 1997), and is often presented by politicians as a panacea for solving complex, 'wicked' issues that span sectors, organisations and professions (Clarke and Stewart, 1997; Rittel and Weber, 1973). There is no one clear definition of what constitutes a partnership and there is undoubtedly some confusion about terms relating to partnership within the literature. Terms such as networking, alliances, co-operation, collaboration and collaborative advantage appear in very similar contexts. Some like Himmelmann (1996) attempt a detailed taxonomy indicating ever increasing degrees of engagement and commitment between organisations, others are happy to regard terms such as partnership and collaboration as being synonymous (e.g. Nissan and Burlingame, 2003).

These terms can also be used ambiguously to describe a partnership as either an entity or a method of working (Hutchinson and Campbell, 1998). This distinction is important for the types of partnerships we are concerned with in this paper. We distinguish partnership as an entity which involves some form of governance from partnership primarily described in terms of collaborative working practices. We believe the latter is a necessary but not sufficient criterion for a 'partnership' to be said to exist. However, in contemporary Britain it is common for the term 'partnership' to be used to indicate a variety of forms of collaboration, whether or not a form of governance is in place, especially in the public sector. In the context of this study, which focuses largely on the ways in which managers conceive of leadership in complex partnerships, we are considering engagement with substantive partnership entities rather than loose confederations or networks. They are also characterised as being inter-sectoral as well as inter-organisational in nature.

Typically, motivations behind partnership are based on the prospect of achieving collaborative advantage (Huxham, 1996): i.e. of parties coming together often across diverse sectors to contribute resources in the furtherance of a common vision that has clearly defined goals and objectives (Wilson and Charlton, 1997). This may be to achieve better policy co-ordination through joined-up thinking and strategy across

sectors (e.g. Regional Skills Partnerships), to full blown re-conceptualisation of service delivery (e.g. the emergence of Children's' Trusts in England). In either case, and whether partnerships are mandatory or voluntary, policy makers or partners believe that working in partnership will add value over and above the ability of agencies working separately across policy fields or sectors.

For the purposes of this paper we have taken a working definition of partnership as: *a cross-sector, inter-organisational group, working together under some form of recognised governance, towards common goals which would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to achieve if tackled by any single organisation*. In this paper we are mainly concerned with partnerships which are strategic in bringing together the public, private and community/voluntary sectors to address shared issues, whether in health (e.g. Care Trusts), economic development (e.g. local economic and regeneration partnerships), local community service co-ordination (e.g. Local Strategic Partnerships), and education and skills (e.g. Regional and Local Skills Partnerships).

The study aims to contribute to the debate on whether leadership in a multi-sectoral partnership context differs from that to be expected within a single sector or organisation, based on practitioners' perceptions drawn from experience. We explored the meaning of leadership with managers who had wide experience of multi-sectoral partnerships. They came from the fields of business, local government, the community and voluntary sectors and a range of government agencies. Virtually all were professionals involved in a number of strategic and operational partnerships simultaneously, with the majority from the public sector.

The purpose of the paper is to report on the practical leadership aspects of partnerships as they emerged through our discussions with this group of managers, who we refer to as 'participants'. Having drawn out some critical aspects of leadership in the context of multi-sectoral partnerships based on their experience, we then ask the question: *"How do managers perceive leadership which leads to collaboration in multi-sectoral partnerships?"* The empirical analysis highlights a number of leadership challenges faced by those working in multi-sectoral partnerships. We relate the data we gathered to the rather limited (in quantity) literature to date on leadership in partnership contexts and conclude with the implications we believe our findings have for both theory and possible lines for further research.

Leadership in Partnerships: The Literature

There is a rich literature debating the nature and characteristics of leadership. This has been recently summarised and integrated in a number of recent publications (see for example Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2005; Bolden, 2004; Grint, 2005; Pye, 2005). However, most of the research on leadership has focussed on single organisations and mainly in the private sector. The literature also tends to be dominated by the US experience. However, more recently issues of leadership in the public sector in Britain have been addressed by the Cabinet Office (2004) and in studies involving public sector managers (Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2005)

As noted in the recent Cabinet Office report (op. cit.), leadership across organisational boundaries has generally received little attention. The extent to which approaches relevant to a single organisation translate adaptively into a partnership context is not clear. The inter-organisational and often inter-sectoral nature of collaborative working would appear to demand a fundamental re-appraisal of the nature of leadership in these often complex, multi-layered partnership domains (Pettigrew, 2003). Yet, it is only fairly recently that leadership in multi-sectoral partnerships has been directly addressed (e.g. Crosby and Bryson, 2004; Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Murrell, 1997).

Compared to single organisations, working in partnership is of an order more complex and ambiguous, wherein inter-organisational relationships imply an array of horizontal as well as hierarchical (Pettigrew 2003), without necessarily diluting hierarchy (Rowe and Devanney 2003); where there is uncertainty about who leads and who follows (Huxham and Vangen, 2000a); where leadership can be represented by organisations rather than individuals within organisations (Stewart, 1999); and where governance arrangements (if they exist at all) may not really reflect leadership as it manifests itself in practice (Davies, 2002). Some authors point to the kinds of things that would represent successful leadership in practice. Carley (2000), for example, points to shared agenda setting and management arrangements; 'institutional space' for different agencies to be involved in their own terms and at their own pace; and attention to the interaction between partners with different cultures and structures, and how these might need to adapt to shape more effective partnerships.

However, despite the high ideals of partnerships and recognition of the need to tackle important social, economic and environmental issues collaboratively, most authors point to the difficulties of collaboration in practice (e.g. Bruner and Spekman, 1998; Kanter, 1994; Webb, 1991). These include competing and hidden agendas (Eden and Huxham, 2001; Judge and Ryman, 2001), lack of trust (Vangen and Huxham, 2003b), and vulnerability to political manoeuvring as well as political interference (Stewart, 1999; Stewart et. al., 2002).

Weiss et al. (2002) in a study in the health sector in the US, identified leadership as the most significant factor in stimulating synergy in partnerships. They describe synergy in terms of achievements of collaboration, including enabling partners to think in new and better ways to achieve their goals, to plan and integrate their programmes and to reach a wider community. They introduce the notion of leadership *efficiency* measured in the following areas: taking responsibility for the partnership; inspiring and motivating partners; empowering partners; working to develop a common language within the partnership; fostering respect and trust; encouraging inclusiveness and openness; creating an environment where differences of opinion can be voiced; resolving conflict among partners; combining perspectives, resources and skills of partners; and helping the partnership reframe issues and be creative in developing new partnership solutions to key issues. They cite other studies as supporting their findings (for example, Alter and Hage, (1993) and Chrislip and Larson, (1994).

Bryson and Crosby (1992) first proposed the idea of leadership needing to be shared in an inter-organisational public sector context. They suggested that leadership may be expressed through the processes operating within partnerships. Murrell (1997) also argued for a sharing of responsibilities, whilst Vansina (1999) viewed diversity – of resources, skills and perceptions - within a partnership as a source of leadership synergy, although there is little about how this can be catalysed or indeed who does the catalysing. This perspective suggests that leadership can take on an impersonal nature, being built into systems for inspiring and nurturing a partnership. However, it would be clearly absurd to suggest that processes alone define the extra dimensions of leadership appropriate for successful partnership.

Huxham and Vangen (2005) and Vangen and Huxham (2003a) discuss leadership in the context of collaboration. They identify hierarchical relationships that are the focus for much of mainstream leadership research, but which they claim are often less

important in collaborative settings. They take the view that notions of informal or emergent leaders (Hoskings, 1988), decentring of leadership (Martin, 1992) and shared leadership (Judge and Ryman, 2001) are more relevant than notions of hierarchy. They consider leadership activities of embracing, empowering, involving and mobilising for those who find themselves 'doing leading'. These views are also shared by Kotter (1999) and Pye (2005). Huxham and Vangen (2005) also conceptualise leadership as the media through which leadership is enacted, through structures and processes. They receive support for this view from Bryson and Crosby (1992) and theories emphasising structural aspects of leadership. Gratton and Ghosal (2005), for example, introduce the notion of signature processes which develop within organisations and embody their character through the processes that have evolved internally based on their values and aspirations.

Feyerherm (1994) painted a picture of members of a collaborative group contributing different forms of leadership to the collaboration, whether consciously or not. This perspective emphasises the role of emergent or informal leaders (Hosking, 1988; Kent and Moss, 1994). Very often in partnerships it is difficult to locate how and where leadership is enacted. This approach suggests that leadership behaviours may well be invisible and go unrecognised, involving backstaging and informal influencing (Pettigrew, 2003). This form of activity is often conducted not necessarily by acknowledged 'leaders' but by political entrepreneurs (Laver, 1997) who may or may not be operating on behalf of sectional or political interests, and sometimes on their own personal interests. It may further be a characteristic of partnership that opportunities arise for individuals to emerge as informal leaders as they become empowered by their employing organisations to engage in partnership activity and as the need to manage complexity in some aspect of the partnership emerges (Pettigrew, 2006). Partnership working often involves a redistribution or even a fragmentation of pre-existing power relations (Chrislip and Larson, 1994) and this phenomenon can in theory open up opportunities for new forms of distributed influence and leadership to emerge.

In the context of public services in the UK the government aspires to transform the quality of services (Economist, 2005). This suggests a requirement for forms of leadership that will effect step change, resonating with notions of transformational leadership associated with Bass and Avolio (1994). Clearly in the context of understanding leadership within partnerships, transformation theory offers an attractive model if not necessarily a description of partnership practice. Recently

Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe (2005) in their study of leadership among mainly public sector managers presented a view of transformational leadership which emphasised personal qualities (being honest and consistent, acting with integrity, being decisive, risk taking, inspiring others and resolving complex problems) and capabilities for leading and developing others (showing genuine concern, enabling, being accessible and encouraging change) and leading the organisation (networking and achieving, focusing effort, building shared vision, supporting a developmental culture, facilitating change sensitively). This view of transformational leadership focuses on personal traits and competences and expands on 'doing' leadership.

Other fields of study perhaps not previously associated with leadership studies are being interrogated in attempts to deepen our understanding of leadership. For example, complexity theory has also been applied to the theory of leadership (e.g. Gleick, 1987; Wheatley, 1994). This theory, drawing from the 'new' science of chaos, takes us further towards an understanding of the particular aspects of leadership as applied to partnerships. It emphasises the dynamics of social networks, interdependence and self-organisation. Thus, this theory acknowledges that central control, authority and homogeneity are not sufficient to describe the complex, often invisible forms of leadership found in complex partnerships. Rather it focuses on those aspects of leadership not vested in one individual or even one organisation (organism) and unrelated to conscious structure and process as a result of human agency effects. Leadership is seen as being distributed, multi-layered, dynamic, diverse and uncertain. Organisations or partnerships are seen as being complex adaptive systems whose ability to thrive depends on their fitness to survive in a dynamic socio-ecological web. It is in these uncertain environments where problems are difficult to resolve that Grint (2005) makes the distinction between leadership, management and 'simple' command and control. Complexity offers deep insights into the working of complex systems and the inter-connectedness of organisational phenomena and its tendency to self-regulation. However, since no individual can conceive of the system as a whole, yet decisions on intervention have to be made in the context of limited time and knowledge, there is a consequent need for leadership in different areas of partnerships and at different levels, i.e. distributed forms (Bryman, 1999).

Distributed leadership can be characterised as situations in which practitioners collaborate at different levels to create a sense of shared direction and purpose. They collaboratively create and initiate processes that are embedded in their

constructed systems. In this conception the idea of leadership as a characteristic of individuals becomes redundant and the difference between leaders and followers becomes blurred to the point of meaninglessness (Spillane, 2004). This view is an attractive one in the context of partnerships as it points to leadership as a collective task (Drath, 2003). It also emerges from an interactive group of individuals with open boundaries (Bennett et al., 2003; LSDA, 2003).

Multi-sectoral partnerships are often associated with attempts to address difficult issues that span the private, public and voluntary sectors. Consequently it might be expected that there will be challenges to leaders which are different to those faced within a single organisation. The preceding sections suggest these challenges may lie in the differing expectations about a partnership among participants, leading to conflicting views on what leadership in partnership settings might mean. The challenges to leadership are compounded by the well documented complexities of partnership working where there is premium on the ability to influence and lead across a number different organisations and organisational cultures.

Methodology

Our research is similar in nature and purpose to that of Huxham and Vangen (2001) which was based on working with individuals who have direct experience of operating in collaborative environments. The research on which this paper is based is part of an on-going sub-regional inquiry (Armistead and Pettigrew, 2004). The authors' institutions (and the authors themselves) are active participants in many of the same partnerships as those who have participated in this inquiry. Hence, we have adopted a research strategy – action inquiry – that is designed to accommodate a participative, as well as an interpretative, approach to practical knowing (Brooks and Watkins, 1994; Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Our objective is to derive insights and theory as it emerges from our intervention, based on the qualitative data we collect (Eisenhardt, 1989).

The basic elements of our approach are based upon the methodology set out in a number of Huxham's published papers (see, for example, Huxham, 2003a,b) and which underpins her and her associates' research (e.g. Eden and Huxham, 1996; Huxham, 2002; Huxham and Vangen, 2000a). The approach has some similarity to phenomenology and ethnography as we capture and interpret naturally occurring data (Marshall and Rossman, 1989) revealed in dialogues rather than interviews or

questionnaires. We adopted this strategy because the construction of questionnaires would inevitably mean presuming or anticipating answers we were seeking based on our own judgements while our interest was in exploring leadership in partnership as perceived by our participants without prompting. The advantage of this approach is that we believe we can get closer to participants' emergent theories in use (Argyris and Schön, 1974) as revealed by the language they use in social exchange than would be possible from more structured approaches based on collecting data from individuals. We then played back our interpretations to our participants through written-up accounts of our events and sought further inputs to refine our interpretations. Since all three authors as well as assistants coded and interpreted the data we tried to minimise any bias arising from singular interpretations.

Our research was based on two significant large events, inter-active learning seminars, each of half day duration, facilitated by leading experts in partnership working from the education sector (Professors Tim Brighouse and Bob Fryer). About fifty practitioners attended each event. Participants were invited from the fields of business, social and health care, local government, the voluntary sector and, most predominantly, education. Virtually all were involved in a number of strategic and operational partnerships simultaneously, and most were public sector professionals. These events included plenary and facilitated round table discussions, the outcomes from which were captured by a variety of methods including mind-mapping software, taping and transcription.

Following these events we organised a series of five Partnership Forums over twelve months in which leading proponents and active partnership participants came together as a learning set to explore and reflect on a range of partnership issues. We drew much of our data for this paper from one of these Forums which was based on exploring aspects of leadership in multi-sectoral partnerships. We introduced some theories of leadership in these sessions to set the scene and to stimulate interaction. We characterised these theories as First, Second or Third Person theories of leadership. First person referred to traits and behaviours of the individual; second person referred to concepts of leadership that focused on the interactive dynamics between individuals and within groups; while third person referred to views of leadership as being embedded in partnerships viewed as entities and characterised by their structures, processes and systems.

The study does not focus on any one partnership, but rather draws out general points from managers' recorded perceptions and experiences of the partnerships in which they participated. Multi-sectoral activity was discussed in terms of mainly public sector/community-based partnerships such as a children's forum; a community safety partnership; a care trust; an older persons' community action network; a campaign to build a new bridge for community, business and regenerational benefits; a tourism partnership; and a town centre partnership. The type of partnerships represented thus ranged widely, including those which are primarily characterised by contractual relationships such as Private Finance Initiatives (PFIs); those which are primarily voluntary and which are, therefore more able to be creative and in theory less constrained e.g. a multi-sectoral economic partnership representing the sub-region and an NHS Mental Health Trust; and those which maybe a hybrid of the other forms, including Local Authority Strategic Partnerships, a Police Partnership and an Education Business Partnership. Some were strategic in nature, some specific and operational. We explore the significance of these forms of partnership in greater detail in Armistead and Pettigrew (2007) .Suffice to say for the purposes of this paper that they were all complex in nature, multi-sectoral as well as multi-organisational and attempt in various ways to tackle domain-wide (Trist, 1983), socially and politically wicked issues (Rittel and Webber, 1973) in a coherent way.

Since all the respondents operated in the same sub-region and commonly encountered each other in the same partnerships, there was a helpful degree of shared experience (if not always shared perception) of partnership issues. This allowed a degree of shared meaning through interactive social construction of concepts of leadership as they had experienced them working in a range of complex partnerships.

Our focus was on capturing the experience of the participants working in partnerships as a generic activity, and to derive insights from them on the distinctive features of leadership that they perceived working in that genre. We were aware of the dilemmas, paradoxes and ambiguities of leadership which beset leaders in single organisations but which are exacerbated in partnerships. We hoped to be able to get our participants to discuss how these were manifested in their own experiences of the partnerships in which they were engaged. We knew they needed to work across organisation boundaries and influence others in order to achieve both their own organisation's goals and objectives, as well as those of the partnership, which may

not be the same. We did not underestimate the challenges facing our participants in resolving these complex partnership issues.

Challenges to Effective Partnerships

Participants identified that, especially in public sector organisations, leadership is contextualised in the challenges in making partnerships effective. The multi-sectoral nature of many partnerships introduces organisations with differing cultures and ways of working, perceptions of what it means to be effective and attitudes to resolving conflicts. We provide an illustration of some of these issues, paradoxes and dilemmas below, all of which we believe contribute to what practitioners may see as failures of 'leadership'. Four themes appear to characterise the challenges: differing expectations, consensus building, dealing with conflict; and performance.

Differing Expectations

In discussions of the challenges facing leaders, one participant spoke of the *"permafrost of partnerships"* often represented by middle managers and the need for leaders to be the *"guardians of purpose",* to break through endless discussion to action. Partnerships are often created or mandated with the promise of a new beginning and approach to tackle complex social, economic and environmental issues. The expectations of each partner are affected by the 'shadow of the future'. Axelrod (1984) emphasises the imperative among partners to work together, building up trust given a reasonable time horizon within which it would not be sensible to defect, as Axelrod terms it. In practice, however, partnerships are often overlain on a palimpsest of previous attempts at collaboration, which may betray a history of inter-organisational, interpersonal or clan conflict. Thus high aspirations looking to the future can be undermined by cynicism from the past. Furthermore, as Pettigrew (2006) points out, the reasons for previous conflicts may well be lost or have developed folkloric status, yet nevertheless serve to undermine and foreshorten the partnership's shadow of the future. The group acknowledged that, although it can be difficult, when a diverse group comes to agreement the result is especially strong. Partnership leaders are able "*to generate the diversity dividend of innovation"* by demonstrating how they value differences in the membership through rewarding participation and contribution. Hearing different points of view will help a partnership expand, clarify and define an issue in a way no single individual ever could: "*when we consider diverse opinions we create synergy within the partnership".*

Consensus-building

Though partners may enter into a collaboration with benevolent intent, it is in practice much more difficult to negotiate shared purpose and resolve competing interests. This can instigate political manoeuvring even when collaborations are initiated voluntarily, as a range of often competing agendas has to be satisfied. These negotiations may never fully satisfy all partners and thus undermine and destabilise the partnership from the outset (Eden and Huxham, 2001). Participants suggested that consensus was the driver of collaboration because of the need to deliver winning scenarios for all partnership members. Thus partnership leaders should lead through influence, by "*letting go of the control mind-set*" and being mindful of the need to aspire to consensus rather than compromise. The group developed a working definition of consensus as being "*when all partners are comfortable about partnership decisions and are able to communicate, justify and defend those decisions to their own organisations and constituencies*". However they did not underestimate the difficulty in agreeing on consensus across a number of organisations and given the micro-political nature of many of the interactions between partners.

Often partnerships appoint a lead partner or a well-resourced partner offers to convene the partnership and perhaps appoint a partnership manager. The lead partner not only will know more about the partnership than other partners but will actively shape it through selective dialogues with members, control of information and its dissemination, control of agendas and more generally creating the environment and process by which partnership dialogue and business proceeds (Lukes, 1974). Thus, dominant members, managers, 'Godfathers' (Mayo, 1997) and power brokers can emerge who become de facto 'leaders' and spokespersons for the partnership, yet have no democratic mandate. Sometimes particular members of the partnership, motivated by the opportunity to influence matters on a wider scale, will use the uncertainty and fuzziness of partnership to indulge in meddling and job/reputation enhancement (Huxham 2003a). Our participants considered that leaders should avoid trying to manipulate solutions that suited the most powerful (or themselves) but should seek to create the conditions whereby all stood to gain at some future point through decisions taken in the short term. The sheer act of then "*sticking to them*", right or wrong, would then create a sense of trust between partnership members through time. Participants perceived one of the leader's roles as to curb the tendency of a lead partner trying to dominate the partnership through personality or the imposition of a culture alien to others. This means that, unlike or to

a lesser extent than in a single organisation, the leader has to reflect on their 'natural' leadership behaviour. They also need to curb any tendencies to dominate as in many instances the partnership leader is the representative of the lead partner's organisation.

Trust was seen as a key element for effective partnerships and integral to building consensus. Although participants found it an intangible, ephemeral, phenomenon, more easily lost than created and experienced more in its absence than presence, they suggested that one of the roles of leaders was to understand how to build trust in partnership contexts by:

- always telling the truth
- listening well
- demonstrating personal accountability for doing what they promise
- taking time to develop personal relationships with each partner; becoming a "*flexible friend*" and "*advisor*"
- encouraging a supportive and open exploration of partners' individual needs and expectations. Leaders should allow '*institutional space*' for different partners to participate in their own way and at their own pace

The notion of being open to offers of support was discussed as some participants had experienced situations where partnership leaders had "*jealously guarded their patches*". It was felt that this behaviour was a particular issue within partnerships where boundaries were contested or potentially contestable and where resources were in limited supply. In this situation leaders could slip into defensive mode, protecting their understanding of partnership issues from challenge and thus alienate existing and potential partners. Arriving at consensus was said to depend on the availability of relevant information and analysis, otherwise we risked jumping to conclusions based on hunch or, worse, prejudice. Scaling this 'ladder of inference' (Argyris, 1990) too quickly needed to be avoided as it conferred even more power on dominant interests in the partnership who were in a position to let their views and opinions fill any evidence vacuum. Thus, participants felt it was important for leaders to generate and share information widely. Leaders should understand and communicate the key drivers of the partnership, ensuring that they were evidence-based and not tendentious.

Managing conflict

Partnerships are created for many reasons, but the principal one is that partners expect that by working in partnership they will achieve more than by working separately. In practice, however, the 'noise' of working in partnership – organisational culture differences, information/meeting overload, strategy differences and implementation issues often fail to generate synergy and may even generate dysergy and conflict (Hastings, 1996). In addition, as organisations take responsibility for managing a complex inter-organisational domain, where accountability lies can become confused and sometimes deliberately obfuscated. This is particularly problematic when organisations collaborate to implement a process resulting in failure, accusations and counter- accusations. It may be difficult to determine accountability in these circumstances and often leads to more contractual forms of relationship rather than partnerships (Audit Commission, 2005). The group suggested that in some situations individuals concerned with delivery may have more experience of working collaboratively than their senior colleagues, who might frustrate the process of partnership by "*buck passing", "gossip"* and indulging in *"tittle tattle"* and *"back-biting".* There was a feeling that partnerships at senior level could generate unhelpful politically motivated behaviour. Thus, leaders needed to "*tackle the crappy issues*" that seemed to multiply in partnership situations with less organisational certainty and independence and more micro-politically motivated behaviour.

As members of different organisations come together to work in partnership there may be an increased propensity for misunderstanding and suspicion as organisations and their representatives jockey for position within the domain. This may escalate into rivalries, skulduggery and conflict as individuals and clans compete for power within the partnership (Pettigrew, 2006). All participants acknowledged that conflict in multi-sectoral partnerships was inevitable, especially in those with full member engagement. Thus an effective leader had to be able to "*smooth the waters"* from time to time. When individual partners block decisions they should be encouraged, the participants emphasised, to search for alternative solutions using the rest of the partnership as a resource. Participants suggested that some partnership leaders sought to manage conflict by "*voting, horse-trading and compromise*" but that these devices should not be part of the process and tension-reducing techniques such as coin-flipping should definitely be avoided.

Attaining performance

Views on what it means for a partnership to be performing well can often differ between members. Often they are associated with notions of mutual transformation implying that partners are not only willing to influence others with their own issues and agendas, but also to listen and be influenced by other partners. This idea is linked to negotiated order theory (Emery and Trist, 1973) and developed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and DiMaggio (1988). However, whereas over a period of time there may be a discernible mutual adjustment between organisations, evidence of mutual transformation is harder to elicit (Hastings, 1996).

Partnerships can easily abstract resource from member organisations as they attempt to tackle complex issues. This may weaken the member organisations and cause them to lose focus and ability to deliver as they become drawn into wider issues, some of which may be peripheral to the organisation's main focus. The net result may be both weaker partnership members as organisations and a weaker partnership. (e.g. Lowndes, McCabe and Skelcher, 1997). The situation is exacerbated by seeking to populate partnerships with all possible interests in an effort to be inclusive can result in inefficiency through information overload, loss of focus and insufficient time to deal adequately with the complexities thrown up. Practitioners often complain that the biggest issue they have with partnership working is the demands it makes on their limited time, especially when they are often involved in a number of different partnerships simultaneously (e.g. Armistead and Pettigrew, 2004).

Another factor is that it is surprising how often members of partnerships don't know who else is in the partnership. This may be due to poor communications, varying degrees of involvement, changing personnel, rhetorical support rather than practical commitment from the top, and so on. But it is a very real problem that can lead to fuzzy accountability, variation in understanding and a peripheral level of involvement for some members. Some may spend fruitless time at meetings in order to be seen to be working in partnership, but actually contributing little and receiving little benefit. (Vangen and Huxham 2000b).

Issues of Leadership in Partnership

Generally, our participants found it difficult to separate what they do as leaders, what they observe others doing and their aspirations for good leadership. As in many leadership studies it was clear that there was no obvious consensus on what

leadership was, although there was a view among participants that *'they knew it when they experienced it'* in practice. They had strong opinions about failings in partnership-working, however, which they attributed to a lack of leadership.   In discussion the challenges to effective partnerships and the implications for leaders in partnerships, our participants made a number of observations, described in the following paragraphs.

Partnership leaders should have a high standing within their own organisations which they could use to reinforce the visible, public face of the partnership. They should be trusted and empowered to commit and negotiate on their organisation's behalf. They should reflect and consider how appropriate their own structures and cultures were for partnership-working, and be prepared to change internal organisational structures and processes to facilitate wider collaborative activity.

Partnership leaders needed to demonstrate vision and commitment, and that *"the buck stops with them"*. They should be energetic and charismatic so others want to follow, not have to follow, although one participant tellingly suggested that most partnership structures and processes *"murder charisma"*. This seemed to indicate a preference for at least some of our participants to be led by a charismatic or characterful leader rather than some amorphous, ambiguous or systemic form of leadership.

Partnership leaders' intellectual capabilities should be such that they can '*think AND act*' whilst being articulate and sensitive enough to communicate clearly to all stakeholders/partners in terms to which they could all relate.   Participants acknowledged that this was a tall order even for the most skilled partnership leaders and professionals, especially when different levels were represented in the partnership (Pettigrew, 2003).

It was felt strongly that leaders had to live the values of the partnership ('*walk the talk*') and inspire and motivate others by being positive, strong role models with a clear view of how things should be done.   They should rise above "*21st century cynicism*" described by one participant as the "*Private Eye effect*", an indictment of the sometime gratuitous tendency towards mistrust of authority in post-modern times (O'Neill, 2002).   As a whole, though, the group felt that *"anyone could be a leader and can be developed as such"* as opposed to the belief that leaders were born and not made.

There was considerable debate about the apparent paradox of having a 'leader' within a partnership, with some participants suggesting that the responsibility for leadership should be shared and distributed amongst the partners. Although no one had experienced such a form of leadership in practice, a number of participants advocated it. The rationale was based on the nature and ideals of working in partnership coupled with the fact that most partners would be leaders within their own organisations and as such would have leadership skills to share. Participants suggested that leadership in partnerships was distinct from that experienced in a single organisation. One participant described it thus: *"traditional leadership is problematic for partnership"* because of *"adversarial, self-preening behaviours"*, suggesting that leadership might reflect or should foster forms of leadership where such behaviour was discouraged or marginalised.

The foregoing summary of issues raised by partnership practitioners provides a flavour of the leadership issues most concerning those managers who participated in our dialogues. This suggests that for many of our participants the concept of leadership was confusing and troublesome, almost being beyond definition. However it was interesting that the predominant metaphor for leadership, and thus the focus of much of the dialogue, was embodied in observable human traits and behaviours. It is not clear whether this was because of participants' direct experience, or whether because their understanding of leadership was such that they had transferred their frustrations of partnership-working as a third person entity into anthropomorphic, first person form. In other words, it was perhaps easier in the absence of a shared view of what leadership in partnership as a concept might mean to conceive of it as if it had human properties.

There thus appeared to be confusion between thinking around the concept of a designated or 'natural' leader and thinking around the concept of leadership. Discussion about leadership tended to be couched predominately in terms of first person traits and behaviours suggesting that our participants thought about leadership as almost synonymous with 'leaders'. We would suggest that the inter-subjective interactions between people in partnerships, what we call second person aspects of leadership though recognised by our participants (in terms of acknowledgement that leadership in partnerships should be conceived as being in some way shared and distributed) were not articulated in such detail as for individual 'leadership' behaviours. Furthermore there was nothing in our dialogues to suggest

any conception of leadership as having the properties of an entity in terms of systems, adaptive mechanisms or chaotic patterns.

Reflections on Leadership in Effective Partnerships

Drawing the threads together, it seems to us that leadership in partnerships was more often than not described in one or two dimensional rather than three dimensional terms. It was most clearly and often articulated as equivalent to the desired traits and behaviours of individuals and secondly as their interactions with others than any distinctively systemic view. There was also an interesting paradox between a general view that leadership in partnership should be, or actually was, different from traditional concepts of leadership in single organisations; yet for the most part our participants defaulted to a view of partnerships having clearly defined leaders with discernible characteristics and behaviours.

Participants' requirements of leaders also included a set of characteristics and behaviours that were largely indistinguishable from those often identified for single organisations. This suggests to us an interesting line of inquiry to define more closely the forms of leadership that might help partnerships to function more effectively that may be hidden from view or hard to distinguish in partnership-working.

Returning to our original conception of first, second and third person taxonomy of leadership in complex partnerships we can begin to make sense of our data and attempt to relate it back to the literature.

First person strategies
First person refers to traits and behaviours of people deemed to be leaders or performing a leadership role emergently. In this conception of leadership, success is best understood as resulting from the possession of a set of personal attributes and skills that are deemed to be necessary in order for multi-sectoral partnerships to function well. These strategies might be viewed as being the same as previously associated with views of leadership espoused by authors including Myers and McCaulley (1985). They are also reflected in the recent studies by Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban Metcalfe (2005) demonstrating personal qualities of acting with integrity, being honest and consistent and resolving complex problems. The question is whether some traits are more desirable for leading in partnerships rather than in single organisations. Based on the data gathered from our participants we propose

that traits which enable the development of the social context for leadership (Pondy 1978) are more important in a partnership environment than technical expertise, although the latter also provides a degree of credibility. It is of interest that our managers identified taking responsibility (for the partnership) as a very important feature in line with Wiess et al. (2002). It is important in the context of first person strategies that individuals need to know themselves which might be expressed as having a high degree of emotional intelligence (Goleman et al., 2002).

Second person strategies

These take account of inter-relationships between people and within and between groups and factions in a partnership. This view of leadership has resonance with the social model of transactional leadership (Bass 1985, Bass and Avolio, Bryman, 1996). However, the second person strategy conception of leadership focuses on what leaders actually do in terms of influencing and shaping the vision and direction of the partnership, 'keeping the show on the road', and taking all the partners along the journey, ironing out conflicts along the way. We see the view of our participants corresponding with the findings of Huxham and Vangen (2005) for collaborative working. Inter-personal as well as inter-organisational skills are emphasised as well as the ability to encourage leadership without formal authority (Kotter, 1985).

Third person strategies

These reflect a focus on structures, processes and systems which are seen as embodying and encoding leadership at a more abstract level than the individual or group. Thus typically, these would be more likely to exist in more mature partnerships which have had time to engineer agreed rules, procedures and protocols that reflect learning from previous practice. They would include the unseen complex socio-technical systems that underlie partnership dynamics and which are often responsible for unpredicted and unpredictable phenomena that then require to be interpreted and managed by leadership intervention. The results seem to indicate that our participants did not easily recognise these 'third person' leadership strategies that, for example, Huxham and Vangen (2000) suggest in their study, nor other systems-based approaches suggested in the literature, for example, in relation to governance (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998). We recognise, however, that this may be owing to differences in context rather than on substantive differences, but nevertheless believe it is a significant finding.

The complexity which we see in partnerships suggests that leadership requires attention to all three strategies and thus theories about the nature of leadership in partnerships also require us to address these syntactic strategies. This does not imply that one mode successively replaces the other. Rather it implies an increasing degree of organisational and governmental complexity and over-layering in order to understand and resolve complex interrelated societal issues (Ashby, 1956; Trist, 1983). In the same way we suggest that whilst these three strategies are necessary in order to view leadership in partnership holistically they are not necessarily successive in nature.

It is clear that first, second and third person strategies are apparent in multi-sectoral partnerships and that this conception of leadership offers a useful heuristic for understanding the range of leadership-related phenomena found within them. However, we believe that more research should be focused on the forms of third person leadership which, although posited in the recent literature, were not clearly mentioned or articulated by our participants.

The predominant use of first and second person conceptions by our participants to describe leadership may be a reflection of real micro-political awareness of the impact on partnership working of the traits and behaviours of 'leaders' and other practitioners. Often the partnership literature in our view underestimates the micro-political and 'clan' nature of inter-organisational partnerships owing to the often necessarily ex post facto and detached nature of most research. Pettigrew's (2006) research into a multi-sectoral live partnership demonstrated the importance of micro-politics well. Working as an insider within the partnership, as an active member and researcher, his longitudinal emergent case study showed that key outcomes were often influenced as much by personalities and relationships between and within well-established factions (pre-dating the partnership itself) to the ultimate detriment of the partnership.

Thus micro-politics can often overshadow macro-political concerns damaging the partnership as a whole. However, this may also reflect a tendency for participants in partnerships, consciously or unconsciously, to abstract and simplify. As a result they focus more on first and second person interpretations of leadership, ignoring the underlying third person dynamics that are perhaps hidden from their view.

Conclusion

Our research has highlighted a number of leadership challenges faced by those working in multi-sectoral partnerships.

We believe the implications of this study for theory are that we need to accept multiple perspectives of how leadership manifests itself in multi-sectoral partnerships and consequently in any framework to interpret leadership in partnerships. It was also evident from our inquiry that despite suggestions from the literature and our participants that leadership in partnership was 'different' from other forms, the predominant discourse was underlain firstly by 'traditional' conceptions of leadership couched in terms of traits, attitudes, competences; secondly by behaviours in inter-subjective dialogues and actions; and thirdly, which was hardly mentioned at all, by structures, processes and systems. The tone of the discourse was also understood in 'traditional' organisational terms with only vague acknowledgement of network and partnership forms as opposed to hierarchical forms of leadership. This is something of a paradox and invites further research to explore more deeply into 'third person' shared and distributed leadership phenomena that appear plausible, appropriate and desirable in complex structures, but which were only obliquely articulated by our partnership practitioners. It also suggests the need for a more forensic investigation of how dispersed and multi-level leadership manifests itself in partnerships, and its implications for both how partnerships work and member organisations' relationships with them.

The implications are that focusing on any one of the above ways of thinking about leadership will provide only a partial understanding. Firstly, individuals need to know themselves, have a high degree of emotional intelligence in terms of relationships with others and deploy behaviours that fit with context. Secondly, individuals and organisations within partnerships need to be able to relate to others with a stake in the domain and make themselves vulnerable to influence and receptive to complementary forms of leadership. Thirdly, organisations and partnerships need to consider the limits of policy-led regulation and political leadership owing to uncertainty and the unintended consequences arising from interventions into complex systems (Giddens, 1984). They need to appreciate the systemic nature of inter-organisational or inter-sectoral alliances, acknowledge that a degree of self-

regulation will emerge from seeming chaos, and that no one organisation or individual will ever be able to be aware of all the complexity involved in the system, let alone control it. In this context perhaps the current desire for partnerships to be rationalized (e.g. as we have seen in England with the advent of Local Strategic Partnerships) evidences a failure of faith in self-regulation. Perhaps it may also indicate a misplaced belief in the rationale and value of frequent intervention to impose fitness for purpose rather than encouraging this to emerge through a greater understanding of the three dimensional nature of leadership in complex partnerships.

Acknowledgements

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