Managing at a distance in social work and social care

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Abstract: Managers are dependent on those with whom they work to behave and act in ways which promote organisational performance, and the experience of those who use the organisation's services is primarily shaped by the front-line workers with whom they are in contact. But managers are often not present alongside front-line workers, and this is especially so within social work and social care services. For senior managers in particular, they may be located away from front-line teams and have only limited contact with front-line workers. The issue then arises of how to have an impact and influence even when geographically remote and unseen. Drawing on the author's experience of front-line to senior management, this paper reflects on what works in managing and leading at a distance, focussing on enabling, empowering and facilitating front-line workers and re-balancing from an overwhelming focus on direction and control.

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Managing at a distance

Management may be thought about as the manager overseeing and directing others who are in a subordinate relationship. The picture might be of the manager or supervisor on the shop floor or alongside the production line in direct contact with other workers, giving instructions and observing their actions. Leadership might conjure up the picture of the battlefield with orders being given by the commander requiring an immediate acceptance and response at a time of crisis.

But rarely, if ever, is it like this. Even within routinised industrial work workers create their own meaning, and determine their own actions and strategies, sometimes in opposition to the intentions of managers (see, for example, the early seminal studies by Burns & Stalker, 1961; Goldthorpe & Lockwood, 1968). On the battlefield everyone has to use their initiative as an immediate response to what is happening (Montgomery, 1961).

And within social work and social care even when the manager is on site, based within the service centre such as a residential care home for which they have a responsibility, they will not be observing all that is happening. It is their subordinate colleagues providing the care for residents who determine the immediate quality of care and the experience of the residents. The shift and rota system within care homes also means that, at most, the manager will be at work for only about a third of the time the service is in operation.

For fieldwork services the team manager will have even less direct knowledge of the practice of members of their team, who will be unseen in much of their contact with service users which takes place away from the office or in discrete office interviews.

It is, however, the first line managers in social work and social care services who still have most direct contact with the practitioners who are undertaking direct work with, or providing the hands on care for, service users, and who are also most likely to have at least some contact themselves alongside other workers with service users. The role of front-line service managers is crucial in determining service quality and performance and also the experience of service users and of those workers who provide the service (see Reynolds et al, 2003; Kearney, 2004; Coulshed et al, 2006; Social Work Task Force, 2009).

For more senior managers their management and leadership will be at even more of a distance and more remote. For example, as a social services director of a large English county I had, at its largest, overall responsibility for all social work and social care provision to children and to families and to disabled adults, including older people, within a population of 640,000 people spread across a geographical area where it took 2 hours to drive from the north to the south and 1 ½ hours from east to west. Services were provided by 3,200 employees within more than 150 service centres (locality offices, day centre services, residential homes etc).

Even with a commitment to spend half-a-day each week meeting with teams within their work locations and bases meant that I only got to meet with most teams every

12 to 15 months. It became more difficult and complex again with the development of integrated services and teams with other organisations, such as the local Health Services, as some colleagues might then be located in multi-professional teams with the work bases provided by other organisations, increasing the number and diversity of work locations to be visited.

The question which arose, and arises, is how to manage and lead at a distance? As managers and leaders how to get others to do what we want and need them to do, and how we want it to be done, even when we are not present, are unseen and may indeed have little direct contact? This is an issue for senior managers, but it is also of relevance to all managers including front-line managers.

It is also an issue of interest for all employed in the organisation. Managers may not be present, but an awareness of their position power and status is still pervasive. This may be a brooding and threatening unseen presence or an implicit impact giving confidence and reassurance that there is control and not chaos within the organisation and that at time of crisis managers will be supportively engaged rather than distanced and self-protecting.

As a consultant with the European Community funded Russian-European Trust for Welfare Reform it is an issue I explored with over 200 social services directors from across Russia and national policy makers in a 'master class' in August 2009 in Siberia. For some of these directors the communities and services for which they had a responsibility were hundreds of miles and days apart, accessible only by helicopter in the winter. It is also an issue I have explored with others in more recent workshops at Kingston, Leicester and Staffordshire universities with social care and social work managers.

Managers and accountability

In the United Kingdom, within a culture of inquiries (Butler & Drakeford, 2003; Stanley & Manthorpe, 2004) the consequences of a tragedy occurring after actions and omissions by front-line workers have previously almost exclusively fallen heavily on the front-line workers themselves. It was Diana Lees, the social worker for Maria Colwell in the early 1970s, who was pilloried by the majority report of the Colwell Inquiry (DHSS, 1974), the first of a genre of public inquiries following the killing of a child by carers. It was Lisa Arthurworrey, the social worker for Victoria Climbie in the early 1990s, who lost her job following the Laming Inquiry into Victoria Climbie's death (Laming et al, 2003).

In both instances, and for many of the inquiries in the years in between, the front-line workers carried the blame and the consequences for a child being killed. In each instance the top managers survived.

But it has changed. Following the death of 'Baby Peter' although the front-line

social workers were dismissed, so were a whole tranche of managers, and it was the children's services director in Haringey, Sharon Shoesmith, who was most pilloried, harried and vilified in the press (see, for example, *The Sun,* 2008).

There is also an increasing pattern of children's services directors losing their jobs, from Surrey to Sandwell to Salford and elsewhere, when the services for which they are accountable receive a poor rating from the independent inspectorate or when a child is killed. In the judgement following the judicial 'review initiated by Sharon Shoesmith, the director of children's services in Haringey at the time of the death of 17 month old 'Baby Peter', the judge commented that

> the prospect of summary dismissal with no compensation and a good deal of public opprobrium is hardly likely to be an inducement for someone thinking of taking the job [as director of children's services] or, perhaps in some circumstances, continuing in it. (quoted by Butler, 2010)

In the two years to March 2010 almost half, 'more than 70' (Higgs, 2010), of the 152 local authorities in England had a change of children's services director.

So being at a distance from the front-line is no longer a defence or a safe position when a tragedy occurs or services are seen to be failing. Managing and leading well at a distance has become even more of a significant requirement if top managers are to survive in their roles. It is now an even greater self-interested concern of managers, although hopefully the ambition to successfully manage and lead is still largely driven by the wish and will to do the job well and to provide high quality services with a well-motivated and competent workforce.

'Management' and 'leadership'

But what is meant by 'management' and by 'leadership'? It is contested as to whether a distinction should be made between 'management' and 'leadership' as individuals, indeed all of us, are likely to be involved in both activities. But it may be helpful to conceptually discriminate between the two terms (Martin & Henderson, 2001; Jones, 2009; Skinner, 2010) to emphasise the different requirements which arise when managers are at a distance.

'Management', for example, might be seen to be primarily about the present, about what is done now and how it is done. It is about the delivery of current services and about current performance and quality and current economy, efficiency and effectiveness. It is 'transactional', concentrating on how current activities are undertaken with the manager monitoring and requiring activity which delivers on current standards and processes.

'Leadership', however, might be termed 'transformational' (for a discussion of

'transactional' and 'transformational' management and leadership see Burns, 1978, and also Adair, 2007). It is about having a vision of how a better performance and outcome might be achieved than within current horizons and understandings, and seeing how to progress from what is done now to how it could be done differently to achieve better results.

The *Every Child Matters* (HM Government, 2003) agenda within children's services, and the *Valuing People* (Department of Health, 2001) and *Putting People First* (HM Government, 2007) personalisation agendas within adult social care, are examples of creating a view of a different future, moving from children and adults seen as passive recipients of care to having competence and capability, and with more choice and control within their lives as active, contributing citizens.

This requires a step change from a paternalistic and sometimes patronising professionalism to a professionalism whose terminology and intentions are about assistance, being an ally alongside service users, and with expertise in enabling and facilitating. These new agendas – which have much in common across the United Kingdom (see: General Social Care Council, 2006; Scottish Executive, 2006; Welsh Assembly Government, 2006) albeit with their roots firmly within the value-base and history of social work (see, for example, Biestek, 1961; GSSC, 2007) – are not about delivering and managing better current behaviours and services. They require leadership to change culture, understandings, actions and activities (Rose, Aldgate & Barnes, 2007).

The task is not *either* to ensure best performance in the here-and-now ('management') *or* to move forward on a journey with colleagues to create a potentially better future ('leadership'). Both are required (Harris, 2007; Lawlor, 2007). To be a leader with no concern for current performance not only demonstrates an irresponsible lack of concern for the current use of resources and the impact for service users, but also provides a poor platform from which to move forward. To be a manager with no ambition or aspiration, or imagination, insight or intuition of what could be better and different, means being frozen in the present and

> the person at the top of the organisation may be in a leadership position, but may not be leading. They may be careful stewards of a legacy organisation. (0wen 2009)

Leadership and motivation

But how as a manager and leader to have an impact on how people behave, what happens and what services are like when you are not present? It is largely about how colleagues, in line management terms 'subordinates', are viewed and understandings of motivation and how to have influence. Whether acting as managers or leaders the results which will be achieved will be dependent on the actions and response

of others. This is recognised by the workforce development councils in England for social care for adults (Skills for Care, 2006) and for children (CWDC, 2007).

McGregor (1960; and see Owen, 2009) described two theories of how people behave and how they should be managed. 'Theory X' was about people as inherently lazy, not trustworthy, needing to be told what to do and requiring close control and detailed direction. This may reflect the instrumental orientation to work for those with repetitive roles over which they had little say or opportunity to shape, especially in the 1950s and 1960s (Kynaston, 2007), where work provides

> the financial means for pursuing the all important goal of self-actualisation outside the factory or office, namely in leisure activities and family life. (Adair, 2006. p. 65)

In contrast, 'Theory Y' was about people as essentially proud, creative and wanting stimulation, and needing space and opportunity if they were to perform well. It is 'Theory Y' which reflects the models of Maslow (1954) and Herzberg (1968; see also Mayo 2001). In Maslow's hierarchy of human needs (discussed in Owen, 2006), which is not only about work but about life in general, it is argued that there are basic human needs for safety and for the physical necessities, such as food, warmth and shelter, but when these basic needs are met people will seek to satisfy higher level needs such as opportunities for achievement, approval and recognition, and for stimulation, self-esteem and 'self-actualisation', building and using one's competence and capacity.

If this is considered within the context of paid employment, it would mean that there are basic requirements which need to be met if someone is to be motivated and satisfied. These would include a reasonable and reliable salary and terms of conditions of employment, such a holiday entitlement, and acceptable working conditions, such as office or centre accommodation and addressing other factors which can cause stress and unhappiness, such as car parking and IT access and reliability. That these requirements may not be met for social care workers and social workers has been made explicit by Birmingham City Council (2009) and the Social Work Taskforce (2009).

When meeting with service teams when director of social services major concerns with which I would often be confronted were about unsatisfactory office accommodation, problems with car parking and not enough computers or unreliable information technology systems, including network unreliability and software programmes which hindered rather than assisted good working practice. The current largely pervasive concerns about the integrated children's system, which have been responded to constructively by the Social Work Taskforce (2009), would be a national example of a concern about the hindrance created by a not fit-for-purpose IT system.

But as a social services director I also came to understand that the model of a linear hierarchy of needs probably is not adequate. Although the motivational gain of a pay award might occur, the enhanced wage soon lost any motivational impact.

A few months on and it would be forgotten or assumed as just the rate for the job. It did not create any lasting motivational benefit, although if pay rates were low in relation to those paid by neighbouring employers or to traditionally comparable occupational groups the continuing sense of grievance did have a lasting impact until the perceived injustice was rectified. What is probably important, therefore, is that meeting more basic needs may not be a motivator, but failing to meet them was a demotivator. However, at all times, receiving positive recognition and feeling proud of and valuing the work undertaken, was a motivator, and this was so for employees throughout the range of wage bands.

Yet what has been increasingly created over recent years, now often described as a culture of 'managerialism' (see Jordan & Jordan, 2000; Harris, 2003), are organisations which are more bureaucratic, procedural, and prescriptive of how employees should act, and with more recording and reporting required to monitor that procedures have been followed. The procedures undermine professionalism by giving priority to managerial power and priorities rather than to professional judgements (Exworthy & Halford, 1999; Pollitt, 1999; Hafford-Letchfield, 2006)). There is also preference for competition rather than cooperation (Payne, 2006).This is certainly so in social care and social work services with professional discretion, autonomy and judgement constrained and with the promotion of market-competition, where a concern with price can trump a concern for people and where a focus on cost can undermine a commitment to community.

The cult of managerialism reflected in burgeoning bureaucracy and prescription also has a danger of undermining the value-base, with its focus on respecting individuals and their differences and recognising their worth and potential capacity, and the perspectives of individual context combined with social context, which underlie social care and social work. All of this challenges and potentially undermines the social policy intentions described above about 'personalising' assistance and seeing people as having competence and with the status and esteem of making a contribution as active participating citizens within their communities. This all requires responsiveness, flexibility and creativity rather than regimentation and standardisation.

It also plays down the reality that, as well as being a practical occupation, social work must recognise and continue to develop its theoretical understandings of individuals in the context of social structures, something which is discarded if it is assumed that all is necessary is common-sense regulated by rules (see McLaughlin, 2008). Even when the rules are evidenced-informed they often deny complexity and leave little space for reflexion, despite the post-modernist world view of increasing complexity, fragmentation and uncertainty (see the discussion in Lawlor & Harlow, 2005; Rogowski, 2010).

Organisational requirements for economy and efficiency may also overwhelm a concern for people in distress and difficulty. For example, the advent of call-centres as the contact point for services, and the increasing demarcation of different workers

and teams for initial assessments, short- term work and then for longer-term contact reflects a focus on managing workflows but with disruption and a lack of continuity for service users – a major issue for a personal professional relationship-based service.

The growth of proceduralism and the bureaucratisation of practice is partly the consequence of the cult of inquiries (Butler & Drakeford, 2003; Jones, 2003; Stanley & Manthorpe, 2004) where inquiries following serious incidents almost invariably recommend more procedures to regulate practice. This is partly an attempt to generalise what is considered to be best practice, and this is also reflected in the burgeoning procedural requirements which follow new legislation. For example, the Children and Young Persons Act 1969 was followed by the government issuing a 63 page booklet of practice guidance. Contrast this with the 10 volumes which were issued to shape required practice following, twenty years later, the Children Act 1989 (Jones, 2010).

But the increase in rules and procedures is also about employers, and also now national inspectorates such as OFSTED, insuring themselves against complaint and litigation by regulating and routinising practice to try to cover any adverse risk. This then requires more measurement and monitoring by managers, and more reporting and reviewing by external inspectorates, to seek to ensure that procedures are followed and performance achieved in line with pre-determined standards.

The experience for employees within organisations where the overwhelming focus of the culture is on compliance is that they recognise that they are seen as more like McGregor's 'Theory X' workers, needing to be told what to do with detailed direction and close control, rather than proud, creative and stimulated 'Theory Y' workers. It may be that the organisations who base their culture and behaviours on Theory X reflect the limitations and lack of confidence and assurance of the organisation's top managers who because of their own anxiety and fears seek to create 'tight' and restrictive 'mechanistic' organisations rather than 'looser' more relaxed 'organic' organisations.

Self-actualising organisations

But what about those organisation which although mindful of performance targets, nationally determined regulations and procedures, and standards set by external inspectorates, still emphasise and work on the basis of a workforce which seeks and thrives on self-actualisation and is motivated by opportunity and recognition? What characterises these organisations?

Firstly, they are likely to be learning organisations rather than procedure-bound organisations. Senge (cited in Mayo, 2001) described a learning organisation as one which:

- fostered a sense of personal mastery for those within the organisation
- partly by building individual capability
- but with people and teams learning together
- leading to the creation of shared mental models (a common view) of how employees throughout the organisation should operate together
- and with a shared vision (a common aspiration) embraced by all in the organisation.

Secondly, they are likely to be organisations where there is a focus on building and maintaining motivation. Adair (2006) described eight principles of motivation:

- be motivated (as leaders) yourself
- select people who are highly motivated
- treat each person as an individual
- set realistic but challenging targets
- remember that progress motivates
- create a motivating environment
- provide fair rewards
- give recognition.

Some of the above would seem to be circular (for example, build motivation by creating a motivating environment), but there is an affinity here with a changing emphasis in social policy and the promotion of changes in social work practice. For children and young people the *Every Child Matters* (HM Government, 2003) agenda emphasises that children and young people should be able to make a positive contribution. For disabled adults there is a promotion through policy of emphasising disabled people's value and potential (Department of Health, 2001; HM Government, 200; HM Government 2010).

The common ground is about seeing people as having choice and control within their lives, and as being active and contributing citizens. It is a move away from the 'deficit model', heavily focussing on people's difficulties and problems, to a rebalancing where people are also seen as having competence, capability and capacity. At the time when social workers and others are asked professionally to re-set their mindset, their own work experience may be within organisations which emphasise what might be seen as deficits in their own practice, with this to be contained by restricting the choice and control they have within their work with a reduction in professional autonomy and space to practice.

Thirdly, organisations which promote a motivated workforce are likely to be organisations where managers and others understand and demonstrate emotional intelligence. Goleman, Boyatiz and McKee (2002) in considering leadership within organisations relate it to emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996) which they describe as including:

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- self-awareness
- self-management
- social awareness
- relationship management.

One might expect that social work, with its emphasis on empathy with and an understanding of others, and on building, maintaining and using relationships in the context of valuing others and recognising and accepting individual differences (see, for example, Barclay, 1982; Gilroy, 2004) might provide a strong emotionally intelligent foundation for those social workers who move into management and leadership roles (Jones, 2009; and see the discussion in Lawlor, 2007).

Fourthly, they are likely to be organisations with some management and leadership stability, creating and continuing a culture which is inclusive for all in the organisation, with a consistency over time in values and vision and within an organisational atmosphere of trust rather than tension (Rogers and Reynolds, 2003). This is a somewhat different description from the very active, energised, excited management portrayed in much of 'In Search of Excellence' (Peters and Waterman, 1982), the 'new management' guru textbook of the 1980s. It is rather more the 'From Great to Good' (Collins, 2001) analysis of successful commercial companies, which Collins (2006) then applied to not-for-profit organisations, with the emphasis on leadership staying stable and continuing and consistent over time to build culture and a shared commitment.

The lessons from the above for management and leadership within social service organisations, including and especially those organisations where the responsibilities and work may often be related to crisis and risk, are noted below. The actions and behaviours below are of particular importance for senior managers managing and leading at a distance, but many of the messages are relevant for all managers. All can be encapsulated as being about a Theory Y emphasis on 'facilitating, enabling and involving' rather than Theory X's overwhelming emphasis on 'controlling and directing'.

The lessons also reflect the reality that within a widely dispersed service, with much activity unseen by managers, and especially senior managers, there is a requirement for 'distributed leadership'(see, for example, Rogers and Reynolds, 2003), with front-line workers required and empowered to use their judgement, take decisions and to act without continued and immediate reference to managers who are not immediately present and make be geographically distant (albeit new technologies may mitigate geographical distance). The experience, expertise and wisdom built and based on the realities of practice should also contribute to the shaping of organisational processes and priorities (Harris, 2003; Hafford-Letchfield, Leonard, Begum and Chick, 2008; Hafford-Letchfield, 2010).

The reality is also despite increased proceduralism, bureaucracy and performance

monitoring, front-line workers and teams still create much of their own experience and meaning at work (Bilson and Ross, 1999). Recognising this as a manager at a distance, and working with it as a reality, is about seeking to participate in influencing and shaping this experience and meaning, being aware of and working with its presence and inevitability, and tolerating the uncertainty and diversity which results.

In essence, despite the critique that managerialism requires 'a managed workforce with no illusions about performance autonomy or ideals that service to clients is paramount' (Jones, 1999, p.47), and despite the squeezing of professional space, workers and their teams still significantly generate their own experience, to a greater or lesser extent in line with or in opposition to the management-described organisational goals and vision.

Leading and managing at a distance

- commit to staff training and development to enhance competence and confidence
- deliver the training whenever possible to teams and workers throughout the organisation together to create a shared commitment and impact and use training as an opportunity to build and transmit culture

- do not neglect planning and review, but within team and service business plans give space for individuals and work groups to define and shape at least some of their own priorities and the means to achieve pre-determined priorities
- and in the reporting and review process actively seek and follow through on the opportunities to give recognition and praise and to celebrate

- as leaders, be visible and accessible, especially to the front-line
- recognise others as 'colleagues' rather than 'my workers'
- be open to challenge and debate
- but all within a clear vision of direction

- insist on 'doing the basics well'
- consistently and fairly challenge poor performance

- focus on the quality of the front-line managers who have most influence on practice and create the day-to-day work experience for their team members
- know and acknowledge front-line realities

- recognise natural and necessary time scales to achieve change
- stay around long enough to make and embed a positive difference

Joint reviews of social services

But does any of this really make any difference? In the late 1990s and early 2000s there was a significant investment in reviewing the performance of local authority social services in England and Wales. Each of the then 172 'councils with social services responsibilities' (CSSRs) were 'joint reviewed' by a team of inspectors from the Audit Commission and the government's Social Services Inspectorate. In addition to data analysis of performance information from the councils and large questionnaire customer satisfaction surveys of current service users, teams of usually three inspectors would spend six to eight weeks within each council meeting with service users and staff, reading case files, visiting services and seeing workers in action, and speaking with other agencies, with managers and with councillors. A detailed public report was prepared about each CSSR, and overview reports were prepared each year (see, for example, Social Services Inspectorate/ Audit Commission, 1999; 2001) as the review programme was rolled out. Alongside the overview reports themed reports were prepared, including a themed report (Social Services Inspectorate/ Audit Commission, undated) on leadership, human resource management and organisational cultures and how these were related to the perceived performance of each organisation.

The Joint Review Team reported that the councils who were doing well in providing social services:

- supported and developed their staff through good communication, training and supervision.
- were committed to learning from users and front-line staff about what works in practice.
- demonstrated leadership in delivering quality services.
- had a demonstrable commitment to change and improvement.

The importance of management and leadership styles, and the resulting organisational cultures, were seen to be directly correlated with the satisfaction of service users, the morale of staff and the scoring on key performance indicators.

The authority where I was the social services director for fourteen years scored as one of the equal top eight of the 172 councils, but with a comment that there was a tendency towards 'a culture of non-conformity' (Social Services Inspectorate/ Audit Commission, 2000) amongst front-line teams and workers. Rather than panicking about what might be seen as a negative comment, this was understood to reflect the 'loose' process of decentralisation, delegation and devolution with the front-line being active in contributing to constructively shaping their own work and processes, albeit within a 'tight' department-wide vision and direction of movement and a requirement and focus on 'doing the basics well'.

Concluding comments

What is dissonant is that when it is known from the major detailed inspection and review programme which was spawned by the then new 'New Labour' government in the late 1990s that a Theory Y understanding of behaviour and motivation was positively correlated with performance, much of the government's actions reflect more of a Theory X response.

There has been a burgeoning of detailed directives and the promulgation of more procedures. There has also been a move from the independent but developmental and learning style of the Commission for Social Care Inspection to the 'hit and run' tick box style of inspections of the Care Quality Commission and, in particular, OFSTED. Performance indicators have become the determinants of performance, rather than a tool for discussion, debate and development.

Rather as with managers, energised, manic but inexperienced and unconfident politicians may cause a lot of activity but with the consequence of the creation of chaos, uncertainty and clogged up, constipated organisations, focussed ultimately on procedures rather the performance (see Seldon, 2005; Toynbee & Walker, 2005; Jenkins, 2007; Mullin, 2009 for comments about the controlling culture of recent governments). Managing and leading at a distance, whether it is political or organisational management and leadership, ought to be based on respect and recognition for, and with an emphasis on the capacity, commitment and competence of, others rather than about an overwhelming emphasis on control and containment.

It is though a question of balance with the weighting to Theory Y but not totally disregarding as managers some Theory X requirements, especially about the non-negotiable requirements to 'do the basics well'. Indeed, managing and leading at a distance does require the availability of performance information to spot and explore variations in practice (see, for example, Jones 1996, for an account of using performance information to explore variations in child protection decision-making), and the same performance information is also of use to front-line teams to benchmark their own practice. Maybe there is a need for a 'Theory Z' emphasising the Theory Y characteristics of self-actualising, motivated colleagues but not totally ignoring Theory X requirements that there are some actions and behaviours which are required and are non-negotiable.

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