

Leadership: A limited concept in a complex healthcare system

Context:

A case study of organisational change in an Irish Regional Health Board.

The original eight Irish Regional Health Boards had exceptional structural stability since their formation in late 1970 in comparison with their neighbours in the UK's NHS. However, in 1999 the Eastern Board was dissolved and a Regional Authority with 'commissioning' responsibility in relation to three area Boards and the Dublin Voluntary Hospitals came into being. As recently as the 18th June, 2003 the Irish Government announced the abolition of the Regional Boards and the introduction of a single national authority. This is the background to a research site which experienced serious cutbacks in the 1980's, the consequences of which have continued to this day. It was also the subject of a government experiment which resulted in the organisation having a part-time Chief Executive Officer for a period of nine years (1988-1996). The organisational change programme initiated by the current CEO provides the immediate background to this study. The Mid-Western Health Board and its counterparts are complex health and personal social service systems which have not been the subject of inquiry in a change context previously.

Purpose:

To explore the contextual nature of leadership and other internal influences.

The challenge of reform in contexts of ambiguity and uncertainty in public health care systems raises recurring concerns about the controllability of such complex systems. Acute hospitals in particular, not unlike research institutions, have been described as ‘unmanageable’ (Berry, 1995) and consequently require different problem solving technologies. Conventional ideas of managerial control, and the presumption of leadership as an influence on individuals or groups, are therefore questionable in such contexts. The generic notion of leadership in, as opposed to the leadership of, healthcare organisations is a useful concept in understanding change management in healthcare organisations. However, an *a priori* assumption of the existence and nature of the phenomenon of leadership must be set aside as a totalising concept as this may create early closure on the key issues (Parry, 1998; Alvesson, 1996). This may limit the opportunity to discover alternative explanations of what is occurring to influence change within the organisation. Thus, the influences of internal phenomena necessitate exploration and explanations which are grounded in respondents’ experience.

Some Theoretical Perspectives:

Leadership models and approaches have evolved from the certainty and simplicity of 'Great Man' theory to a predominantly systems thinking perspective. More recently proponents of participative self-organisation provide an alternative to and contradict systemic self-organisation. This has implications for conventional understanding of leadership as a cult idealisation which reduces differentiation and "lumps all other roles together as "followers" giving a highly simplistic view of interaction..." (Griffin, 2002: 219). The perspective of complexity and emergence in organisations focuses attention on everyday interaction between people in their local situation in the living present. In ethical interaction roles emerge, including the roles of leaders. Against a background of organisational complexity a variety of considerations suggest the need for grounded theories of leadership in substantive settings. Thus variety encompasses leadership and management, power and empowerment, values, diversity, distance, context, political aspects, substitutes for and implicit theories of leadership.

Various contextual considerations also arise which are not usually encompassed in the well-known theoretical/approaches to leadership such as diversity, distance, professional context, political aspects, empowerment, values, complexity and emergence. Of particular interest is Ammeter et al.'s (2002) antecedents, mediators, moderators and consequences in their 'political' model of leadership. Its components are very similar to those of the emergent model in this study. A grounded approach is suggested which is capable of encompassing a multitude of variables both situational and moderator.

Leadership viewed from a managerial perspective overcomes the more limited approaches traditionally adopted in research on the subject. It also facilitates an alternative to leader-centric studies as attending to one element such as leadership is inadequate.

The theoretical perspectives examined provide relevant material which is applied to the empirical story as an emergent model. There are priorities and necessary choices in assessing the model against the extant literature in light of the considerable theoretical and empirical material which is available of those analysed.

Research Design:

In determining an appropriate choice of methodology for this study current preferences and issues in organisational, management and leadership research are considered. A primary research interest in subjects' meaning and interpretational systems to gain explanation by understanding indicates an ideographic methodology. This is consistent with the emphasis in the new approach on the leader as 'manager of meaning' which requires a qualitative strategy (Bryman, 1997). The choice of a grounded theory approach recognises that participation in research itself can change the nature of the phenomenon and is also oriented towards identifying and articulating overarching concepts and their causal linkages. Ideas are organised through systematic analysis. Its foundations are theoretical sampling and constant comparison which lead to theoretical saturation and a reduced set of categories. There is no 'purist' single path of grounded theory methodology. The analytic framework (category-paradigm) which emerges in this study is resonant of Partington's (2000) revised approach which relies on interview- based causal-theory rather than upon participant observation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This fits with Bhaskar's (1975) critical realist ontology.

Methods of data acquisition in this ethnographic type case study are examined. Two major activity domains (managerial and professional) provide the data groups and sets through multi-disciplinary focus groups (3 managerial, 10 professional) involving 78 participants, semi-structured in-depth interviews (7 managerial, 7 professional) and semi/open-questionnaires (13 managerial, 20 managerial/heads of discipline). The data are therefore generated through multiple (data) streams: multi-level, multi-disciplinary and multi-method. The managerial domain includes each level of management. The professional domain consists of senior clinicians and nurse managers and multi-disciplinary service groups. Data collection and preliminary analysis were undertaken between

November 1998 and September 2001. Some participant observation was also undertaken by the researcher to inform the process and data analysis.

The majority of leadership research has been conducted within the tradition of quantitative research which facilitates the correlation of leadership variables to outcomes (Bass, 1990). Bryman et al. (1996: 288) observe that quantitative research on leadership offers huge advantages to the researcher who wants clear cut specification of causal connections between different types of leader behaviour and variable outcomes. Leadership as understood by (internal) organisational actors is a subjective concept. Bass (1990: 37) suggests that 'if a theory of leadership is to be used for diagnosis, training and development, it must be grounded theory, grounded in the concepts and assumptions that are acceptable to and used by managers, officials and emergent leaders' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Principal Findings:

This study focused on the health and social care organisation's internal change influencers and influences as mediators and moderators of its overall objective. The concepts of leaders and leadership, and followers and followership were avoided as totalising concepts in the inquiry to prevent early closure on the respondents' interpretations or explanations of their experiences. The adoption of the terms 'mediators' and 'moderators' of change recognised that influential players or agents of change were a part of, and not the sole dynamic in, an organisational arena of change. Mediation in this context defined a relationship which connected the organisation's people to its overall object of activity. Mediators and mediation are more inclusive concepts than leaders and leadership as they encompass agents, agency, artefacts, ideas and social influence processes. The mediation of performance and change may accordingly be attributed to a variety of phenomena in social interaction. Moderators, as limiting factors or inhibitors, contained or maintained the continuity of the previous order as a counterforce against the mediators of the current changed order. Moderators regulate or restrain change actions. The mediators had within themselves moderating elements which conditioned their own effectiveness in influencing change.

The emergent determinants of mediator effectiveness were examined through:

- The differentiation of leadership and management roles of managers and professionals.
- The evidence of a shared purpose, currently and in the past.
- The linkage of change purpose and roles.
- The alignment and variation between managers' and professionals' leadership expectations and indications in the system.

These determinants were moderated or sustained in the respondents' reported evidence of the mediator influences and in their reports of the change experience.

Conclusion:

The findings are summarised as linked components in an emergent model. The contextual dimensions, domains and activity strands which include mediator influence, mediating through people and the operational system are key components of the model of influences on organisational change. These are related to the relevant literature and the composite model as an explanatory and developmental framework.

The contextual aspects (external and internal) are framed in relation to the wider policy systems and dimensions of healthcare and the internal characteristics of the inherited order. The principal actors in the model's narrative present their antecedent and actual experiential stories through the activity strands which emerge in the research process. These actors represent two major domains in the healthcare organisation (managerial and professional) and their territories are clarified with reference to domain theory and related literature on the professions.

The grounded Emergent Model demonstrates a more complete influencing system in comparison with existing integrated models or approaches to leadership of change. It is examined in relation to those models to identify similarities and differences. Systemic change models also provide a reference point in reaching conclusions on the properties of the Emergent Model.

Reflection

This study aimed to make a contribution to leadership theory by using a grounded approach, which elucidates some of the internal logic of the organisation's influencing capacity as mediators and moderators of change, rather than imposing an external reductionist logic on participants' experience. A contextual-processual approach to both change management and organisational research provides compatibility and synergy in these conjoint actions. This supports management action which is evidence based and relevant to a substantive setting. Domain perspectives highlight contextual conflict and ambiguity and the validity and utility of domain theory in underpinning the need for organisational development and learning technologies which fit with healthcare systems.