Acculturating Public Service Leaders as Change Agents?
Mediatory Responses to Leadership Development in England

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Instrumental Acculturation - Seductive Promise Unfulfilled?

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, to consider the nature of instrumental strategies for acculturation and of variable mediation as an integral feature of their implementation. Second, to offer an illustrative empirical account of the mediation of an acculturation effort. Findings will be reported from comparative research on English public service leaders’ perceptions about the degree to which they are ‘change agents’ proactively working to implement government-driven reform, and possibly also independent change agendas. Their responses will be explored to external leadership development provision designed, in part, to build their capacity as change agents.

Politically driven attempts to acculturate public service leaders have become internationally widespread (Bush 2008). They draw inspiration from the managerialist advocacy of ‘culture management’ (Wallace and Pocklington 2002), orchestrating the development of a sustainable and unified - or ‘strong’ - organizational culture (Peters and Waterman 1982). The ‘cultural turn’ triggering interest in culture management originated in the US private sector, captured in the aphorism ‘...a new law of business life: In Culture there is Strength’ (Deal and Kennedy 1982: 19). The focus on culture was taken-up in related management theory-building and consultancy through the 1980s. Acculturation as a strategy is now widely promoted for managerial and political purposes ranging from smoothing the aftermath of private sector mergers (e.g. Stahl and Mendenhall 2005) to nurturing a ‘shared ethos of service’ (OPSR 2002: 28) across all public service sectors.

The idea that the acculturation of others can be planned and implemented as a managerial or political strategy to facilitate desired organizational change has great significance for the public services. Its promise is seductive: winning over the very people that acculturators depend upon to implement the changes they wish to see. The instrumental logic is that acculturated implementers will strive voluntarily to achieve acculturators’ goals because these goals have become shared. Not only will implementers be committed to the spirit of the change and so offer more than minimal compliance, but they will also free acculturators from costly surveillance and unpopular corrective action. For government policy-makers, acculturating public service organization leaders as conduits for reform offers the prospect of cascading. Through the medium of these leaders they can reach every organization member in the public service system. For acculturated leaders will strive, in their turn, to acculturate others in their organizations towards contributing voluntarily to the faithful implementation of government driven reforms. The latter will become self-disciplining through internalizing acculturators’ goals.

Yet the promise of acculturation remains remains at least partially unfulfilled. Questions long ago raised over the efficacy of planned acculturation (e.g. Willmott 1993; Anthony 1994) are both conceptual and empirical. If the instrumental logic is flawed, the significance of acculturation for the public services becomes the possibility that it amounts to wasted effort.

Conceptual Problems

A few indicative problems will suffice to give a sense of the conceptual difficulties. First, the concept of culture itself is hyper-referential (Kuper 1999), spanning everything from consciously held beliefs and values reflecting unquestioned assumptions (Schein 1985) to subliminal underlying codes of behaviour (Firestone and Louis 1999). The deeper culture is held to run in organizational life and change, the less open to political and managerial
manipulation it is seen to be. For acculturation to be feasible, the strategy must be capable of impacting directly and reliably on the elements making up an organizational culture. Such a strategy is self-evidently capable of articulating acculturators’ consciously held beliefs, norms and values, but its capacity for persuading others to switch to them - rather than just behaviourally complying - is questionable. Whether an acculturation strategy is capable of influencing subliminal codes of behaviour, beyond the reach of what can be articulated, seems even less clear. Insofar as culture is viewed as a metaphor for what organizations are, deep down (Smircich 1983; Meyerson and Martin 1987) - as opposed to what organizations have, on the surface - culture cannot be sensibly treated as a discrete organizational variable open to calculated managerial manipulation.

Second, acculturation is not like filling an empty vessel. Target recipients will have long been socialized (Merton 1963) into various forms of cultural allegiance. By the time public service professionals take on a leadership role, they will already have experienced personal and professional socialization, and even organizational socialization into the institution where they currently work (Hart 1993). Therefore elements of the fostered culture will inevitably interact with the target recipients’ existing one, creating conditions for possible reinterpretation and adaptation. By foregrounding the inculcation of desired cultural elements, the concept of acculturation tends to underacknowledge the implication that the old cultural elements in the target group must be overlaid by the new.

Third, the concept of culture embraces what a collectivity may be held to share. The instrumental notion of a ‘strong’ culture conceives strength in terms of the shareable being extensive, compatible and widely acceptable. Conflicts are in principle dissolvable in a consensual ‘settlement’. Yet what is shareable is not intrinsic to the concept of culture. So sharing could in principle include a collective sense of what is mutually unacceptable to different groups within the collectivity, as in the notion of ‘balkanized’ school staff cultures (Hargreaves 1994), or even a shared sense of ambiguity over what exactly is shared.

What is to count as the collectivity itself is also not intrinsic to the concept of culture. When does a culture end and subculture begin? Individuals and groups might conceivably experience multiple, overlapping collectivities, and their composition may not be fixed. Take the formation of a multi-specialist healthcare team in a large hospital. If all team members are to be conceived as subscribing to a hospital staff culture, to their different medical or nursing specialist professional cultures, and to a team culture, it becomes difficult to characterize them as all being members of the one culture. A better metaphor might be of the organization as a ‘melting-pot’ of interacting contributory cultures, perpetuating a degree of ambiguity about what is shared and what is not.

Fourth, the notion of acculturation is processual, but the time dimension it embodies is unspecific. The shorter the time-frame implicit in the idea of acculturation, the more rapid and penetrative must its assumed impact be for the desired overlay to be achievable with original target recipients - who will be conscious of the attempt to win their hearts and minds. The longer the time-frame, the less immediate the impact needs to be, and the less reliant it is on the initial response of the target recipients when the acculturation effort is launched. The longer-lasting the strategy, the more the cultural elements being promoted will come to constitute part of the background social and professional framing of discourses and assumptions into which the next generation of target recipients are subliminally socialized. Yet advocates of culture management tend towards an assumptive short-term time frame,
overtly trying to acculturate today’s target recipients rather than quietly shaping the socialization of tomorrow’s generation.

**Empirical Problems**

Faith in culture management has been punctured by experience and research pointing to the mediation of acculturation efforts: behavioural codes, beliefs, values and norms are not very controllable. Whether instrumental acculturation strategies are found to work on the ground depends on whereabouts in organizations researchers look. Suffice it to contrast asking organizational leaders and managers retrospectively for the secrets of their success (e.g. Peters and Waterman 1982) with exploring the experiences of individuals and groups throughout organizations, including those who are the target of intervention. There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that organizational cultures are relatively unmanageable, and that while surface behaviour can be fairly readily modified, shifting cultural allegiances in a desired direction is less plausible.

Many public services leaders reportedly retain allegiance to their longstanding service culture. They and front-line professionals may comply rather than committing themselves to the promoted cultural shift (e.g. in schools, Moore et al (2002); Farrell and Morris (2004); in higher education, Deem (2004); in health, McNulty and Ferlie (2002); Mueller et al (2003)). Culture management is acknowledged amongst sympathetic scholars as difficult (Adler et al 2003; Mintzberg 2002; Newell et al 2003). Those viewing culture less managerialistically have noted that in schools (Hoyle and Wallace 2003), universities (Strathern 2000) or hospitals (Weick and Sutcliffe 2003), professional cultures are deeply embedded, often change-resistant, and may contribute to sidestepping or modifying government reforms.

Of course instrumental acculturation is not necessarily a one-shot intervention. When accompanying compulsory innovations backed by heavy surveillance and punitive sanctions, behavioural compliance may win out over cultural allegiance or resistance. Accruing UK research evidence suggests that the acculturation of public service organization leaders as conduits for government-driven reforms may be less crucial than central directives and sanctions. The latter circumscribe the scope for leaders to lead in those public services which are fully public-funded and facing sustained government intervention (e.g. in schools Case et al (2000); Currie et al (2005); in health Hoque et al (2004).

**The Imperative to Attempt Acculturation through Leadership Development**

However, policy-makers generally seek more than compliance. The institutionalization and sustainability of reforms depends on support from those who coordinate and provide services, rather than what they can be cajoled into doing while the pressure is on. The mediation of instrumental acculturation therefore has great significance for public service reform. Policy-makers cannot afford to ignore the cultural implications of their public policies and associated innovations promoting radical change and ongoing improvement. So they cannot afford to ignore the part that acculturated senior staff might play in acting as ‘change agents’, on behalf of government, acculturating their organizational colleagues. In recent years therefore, leadership development - typically through training and networking activities - has become a key policy lever to build capacity for leading the implementation of reform.

England is in the vanguard of leadership development for the public services, relying heavily on external training and other support, as opposed to promoting service organization-based
support activities. Separate national leadership development bodies (NLDBs) have been established for each major service since the New Labour government came to power in 1997. Most were set up by government departments responsible for a particular sector. A couple were created independently, including that for higher education, but even here the NLDB is increasingly reliant on government agency funding. NLDBs are variously involved in the formulation, provision, commissioning and accreditation of external leadership training and complementary support activities to meet assumed or identified leadership development needs. They operate largely through culture management, though some also have an element of compulsion through training for accreditation which is necessary for appointment to a formal leadership position. But each has been launched into the context of an existing professional service culture with a sector-specific history. The attempted acculturation of service organization leaders runs-up against this service professional culture, stimulating variable mediation depending on each sectoral context, as the empirical case will show.

The remainder of the paper falls into three sections. First, the research will be introduced, including its substantive focus, theoretical orientation and methods of data collection and analysis. Second, selected findings will be reported to portray how the promotion of organizational leadership is mediated, across service levels and between service sectors. Finally, tentative conclusions will be drawn about the relative unmanageability of instrumental acculturation. There are some signs that a possible ironic consequence of opting for leadership as a policy lever may be to foster mediation through giving leaders an enhanced sense of their empowerment to foster organizational change according to their existing professional culture, rather than fully embracing the culture of reform.

Researching Leadership Development in the English Public Services

The study is a mainly qualitative investigation entitled ‘Developing Organisational Leaders as Change Agents in the Public Services’, funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council and undertaken by a team from the Universities of Cardiff and Bristol. It focuses on how formally designated service organization leaders and their senior colleagues in English education and health service organizations seek and experience external opportunities to support their development as leaders, particularly in relation to change. Special reference is being made to the contribution of NLDBs to external leadership development provision. The investigation is exploring how far leaders and aspirants are encouraged to - and actually do - perceive themselves as change agents: whether implementing reforms on behalf of central government, promoting alternative agendas including local and internal initiatives on behalf of themselves and other stakeholder groups, or both.

The research covers four sectors in the two largest and most complex public services: education and health. The secondary school, primary care trust (PCT) and hospital sectors are fully public funded. (PCTs are novel organizations created in 2001 as part of government-driven reform with the function of coordinating and purchasing local healthcare services.) The two NLDBs covering these sectors were established by central government and their provision is steered and monitored by the relevant government department (Table 1). The fourth sector, higher education (HE), is only part-public funded. The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) originated differently, arising from within the sector. A business case was constructed from research and steered by representatives of professional associations for vice chancellors and college principals. However, the formal independence of this NLDB from government is tempered by its significant receipt of resources from the
government HE funding agencies. The mix of sectors was selected for investigation to explore whether the proportion of public funding and strength of association between NLDB and government affects the perceptions of organization leaders as change agents for reform or independent change agendas.

Table 1: NLDBs covering the three fully and one part-public funded sectors being investigated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National Leadership Development Body (NLDB)</th>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Year of inception</th>
<th>Full or part-public funded service sector served</th>
<th>Degree of association between NLDB and central government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National College for School Leadership</td>
<td>NCSL</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>public funded schools (including secondary schools)</td>
<td>close - remit letter from central government's education department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Health Service Institute for Innovation and Improvement</td>
<td>NHSIII</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>public funded health organizations (including primary care trusts and hospitals)</td>
<td>close - set-up after a central government 'arm's length bodies' review, incorporating activities of the previously established NHS Leadership Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Foundation for Higher Education</td>
<td>LFHE</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>part-public funded higher education institutions</td>
<td>distanced - set-up by bodies representing HE, financial support from UK funding councils via the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Government-driven reform is conceived as having three components, coexisting in some tension. First, as a generic, evolutionary, loosely connected and partially contradictory political project focused on restructuring to transform the organizational forms and mechanisms through which public services are managed and provided. Second, as an equally shifting, sometimes disjointed, discursive strategy to shape thinking about public services consistent with this political project. Third, as a loosely-coupled configuration of control technologies - including NLDBs - to translate political aspiration and discursive intent into action across administrative levels that changes the character and quality of service provision. These components provide intellectual and ideological means for reconceiving and reconstructing the public services to realize new priority interests. A political and ideological struggle is ongoing to realize and legitimate these interests through a new settlement for public and partly public-funded services emerging in the ‘post-new public management’ (Ferlie et al 2003) milieu.

Intermediaries orchestrate (Wallace 2007) this settlement across service administrative levels, brokering its cultural acceptance and implementation or acting as independent change agents for their sector. They include service organization leaders, who contribute to steering the brokering process and mediate change as it interacts with existing discursive frameworks and institutionalized practices reflecting service cultures. Service organization orchestrators need convincing if they are to become advocates of a new settlement rather than overt resisters or covert subversives - adapting undesired policy changes to realize values that are antithetical to those underpinning the policy (Wallace 1998). Hence the importance for government of acculturating potential orchestrators as change agents through the control
technology of NLDBs: mobilizing service professionals to alter their practice in the favoured direction. Other stakeholders may equally wish to acculturate change agents retaining some independence from government. A combined cultural and political perspective on interaction (Wallace 2000; Wallace and Pocklington 2002) grasps how organization leaders respond to uses of power by those attempting to shape their professional culture, and how these stakeholders’ cultural allegiances shape their uses of power.

As a novel control technology, NLDBs constitute a strategic form of managerial innovation (planned change) to facilitate the rest of the evolving ‘profile of innovations’ in service organizations. The profile comprises policy changes associated with the UK government-driven reforms, and possibly also independent initiatives which are compatible with the reform thrust. Innovations in the profile may serve four complementary purposes (Wallace 2007: 20-1):

1. improving the provision of particular services including the funding base;
2. identifying where service improvement is needed, and measuring how much is being achieved;
3. improving service leadership and management to create favourable conditions for service improvement efforts;
4. building generic capacity to implement externally or internally originating change, facilitating the implementation of other innovations.

Purpose 1 is the goal for reform and compatible independent initiatives, for which the other purposes are means of support. NLDBs are most centrally concerned with purpose 3: improving leadership and management. They also harness strengthened leadership towards purpose 4: building generic change capacity for implementing other innovations. The latter encompass purpose 2 (identifying improvement needs and measuring performance) directed ultimately towards purpose 1 (service improvement). NLDBs are positioned to attempt the acculturation of service organization leaders as change agents for the implementation of other innovations in this profile. Acculturation entails NLDBs articulating a discourse of service leadership conducive - or at least not inimical - to the government’s reform programme and to compatible independent initiatives. They occupy a mediating position between central government and its relevant departments responsible for the particular public service on the one hand, and service organization leaders and their professional associations on the other.

An initial discourse analysis of government and NLDB documentation (O’Reilly et al 2007) indicates that service organization leadership is firmly associated with government-driven reforms at these levels, though the LFHE documentation underscored its formal independence from government. Leaders are only occasionally depicted explicitly as change agents for reform. But the linkage is made through their common portrayal as promoters of broad ‘public goods’ - including high educational standards and a healthy population - to be achieved through specific reforms. The mediating position of the NLDBs is reflected in their documentation. While following this line in respect of reforms, the NLDB documents articulate fairly generic areas of leadership activity that can be inferred as relating equally to reforms and independent initiatives. These documents represent service organization leaders as having relative autonomy, and do not represent either the NLDB role or that of service organisation leaders as being solely for promoting government-driven reform. But the parameters of their acculturation role are implicit in what is not said - there is no promotion of resistance to reforms or independent initiatives that run counter to them.
Service organization leaders also have a potentially mediating role, especially if they might also perceive that they have relative autonomy from government: neither bound faithfully to implement every reform nor precluded from taking independent initiatives. To explore the research questions related to these perceptions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 95 senior staff from 20 service organisations in the four sectors during the summer of 2007 (Table 2). It was planned to include the formal organization leader (headteacher, chief executive, vice chancellor) and up to four colleagues with the most senior management responsibility in each organization. In the event most formal leaders were interviewed, the number of informants per organization varying from one to six. The interviews were transcribed, coded in connection with the research questions, and qualitatively analyzed (Huberman and Miles 2002) using computer software. Strategies included content analysis of discourses and perceptions.

Table 2: Profile of interviews with senior staff in service organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. interviews</th>
<th>English Fully or Part-Public Funded Service Sector</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Secondary Schools Primary Care Trusts Hospital Trusts HE Institutions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formally designated leaders</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other senior staff</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| No. service organizations | 5 | 5 | 4 | 6 | 20 |

The Perceptions of Service Organization Leaders

The focus of interviews in each of the four sectors included informants’:

1. approach to leading change and self-perception as change agents for government-driven reform and independent change;
2. experience of external leadership development (if any) in the form of training and other support, and its role in developing them as change agents;
3. perception of the impact of external leadership development on them as change agents.

The findings for each focus will be presented in turn, and comparisons will be made between sectors.

Are we all Leaders Now?

Almost without exception, the senior staff interviewed from all four sectors confirmed that they did identify strongly with being a leader in their organizations. They had become acculturated to a belief in leadership as a core component of their role. A university dean of faculty listed responsibilities of this role as:

Leading the management team to deliver the objectives of the School, and the strategic plan of the School, it is leading the development of the strategic plan, and, yes, in fact
leading each initiative, be it leading the marketing and recruitment of the School, leading the space reconsiderations of the School, leading the reconsideration of the course portfolio.

A minority emphasized how they were not sole leaders in their settings, as a hospital medical director indicated: ‘leadership at the top is effectively a sum of the little leaderships that take place everywhere in the organization.’ Only one, a hospital medical director, indicated a distanced approach towards leadership: ‘Every month or two I go over to our education block and I give a lecture on leadership. But...I don’t talk about leadership in the way a lot of people talk about leadership. I talk about how you set about making a hospital better.’

Informants strongly affirmed how their leadership entailed orchestrating change, as the categorization of their leadership discourses portrays in Table 3. (These categories are not mutually exclusive, and individual informants may have mentioned more than one.)

Table 3: Perceived linkage of leadership with change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of leadership discourse</th>
<th>Secondary Schools</th>
<th>Primary Care Trusts</th>
<th>Hospital Trusts</th>
<th>HE Institutions</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. viewing leadership in terms of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. implementing government-driven reforms</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. strategy, giving clarity, setting direction or decision-making</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. involving others in change or developing them to take it on</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. inspiring and motivating others or providing a moral framework</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. responsibility for others’ work (team, project, organization)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. dissipated/distributed</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. promoting academic quality</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No. informants articulating leadership discourse (Total = 94) | 25 | 21 | 19 | 29 |
Categories 1-4 either refer explicitly to the content (e.g. reforms) or process of change (e.g. setting direction), or imply that a desired change in others’ work is being promoted (e.g. inspiring). While categories 5-7 do not make this association, they conceptualize a framework of expectations for leading change if it were required, whether by the informant (e.g. as team leader) or by others (where distributed). Informants tended to describe their approach to leading change in fairly general terms.

Relatively few informants (and these solely in the two health sectors) associated their approach - unprompted - with implementing government-driven reform. It did not appear to be at the forefront of most informants’ minds. That it was mentioned by around a third of informants from each health sector may reflect the sheer extent and directiveness of healthcare reforms (Pollitt 2007) compared with HE or even secondary schools. About a fifth of informants from the former sector highlighted academic leadership, a substantive organization-wide and specialist departmental focus for senior staff which was unique to this sector.

Agents for Whom?

Informants’ degree of distancing from a primary leadership role as reformers was indicated in their self-perceptions as change agents, summarized in Table 4. (These categories are not mutually exclusive, and individual informants may have mentioned more than one.).

### Table 4: Perceived role as change agents and perceived government expectations of this role

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptions of Change</th>
<th>Secondary Schools</th>
<th>Primary Care Trusts</th>
<th>Hospital Trusts</th>
<th>HE Institutions</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>self</td>
<td>gov</td>
<td>self</td>
<td>gov</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. faithfully implementing government-driven reforms</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. adapting reforms to local circumstances</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. taking independent initiatives</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>(-)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>(-)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No. informants perceiving themselves as change agents (Total = 90)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secondary Schools</th>
<th>Primary Care Trusts</th>
<th>Hospital Trusts</th>
<th>HE Institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The large majority did regard themselves as agents of change. But although about half saw this role to include orchestrating the faithful implementation of reforms, two thirds saw it to include adapting them, and two thirds to include taking independent change initiatives. In the words of one hospital director of strategic development: ‘It’s a pretty uninspiring vision to say, “our vision is we’re going to implement government policy.”’ So, if you’re wanting
people to go with you on the journey then having a broader vision, which makes sense locally, and is articulated in a way which has meaning locally, is a much better way to make progress.’

Most of these leaders were reportedly independent-minded enough to adapt at least some reforms to their local circumstances and to push their own change agendas unrelated to reforms. Yet their self-perceptions ill-matched their perceptions of the government’s expectations on them as change agents. The majority of informants who mentioned their perception of these expectations (depicted in brackets in Table 4) felt that they had been cast as faithful reformers first, adapters second, and initiators of independent change a poor third.

While no informants implied that they ignored reforms, the relative emphasis on adapting them and taking independent initiatives was greatest in the two education sectors. The scope for manoeuvre here may reflect the slightly lower burden of compulsory and tightly framed reforms than the health sectors. However, there was significant emphasis on adaptation and independent initiatives here too. Overall, most informants seemed to subscribe to a professional culture and identity as leaders that legitimated their use of power for mediating reforms to suit their circumstances and priorities, and also for promoting other changes.

External Leadership Development: a Technology of Control through Acculturation?

As noted earlier, the acculturation of informants to perceive themselves as leaders with a role in promoting change had clearly happened, since the term ‘leadership’ was rarely used in the public services until recent decades (for its history in education see Hoyle and Wallace 2007). But the sources of their acculturation are likely to be many and varied. One possible source - certainly in government eyes - could be the promotion of leadership through the managerial innovation of NLDBs (including school education and health). They may be conceived as an investment in a novel technology of control to operationalize the New Labour government reform programme in different service sectors (OPSR 2002: 21) on the grounds that it ‘requires support for and development of excellent leaders capable of tackling poor management and inspiring ambitious performance’. The NLDBs for the school education and the health sectors were part of this investment. Once the LFHE was independently established for higher education, in effect it was soon incorporated into the investment portfolio through the central government agency element of its funding (described earlier).

Informants’ experience of external leadership development in the form of training - mostly traditional away-from-the-workplace courses - is summarized in Table 5. (Individual informants may have experienced training from both their NLDB and other providers.) Overall, NLDB and other training sources had each reached about two fifths of informants. A higher proportion of those in HE had experienced such leadership training than in the other three sectors. A factor for the secondary schools sector was that successful completion of training provided by the NCSL and its training partners to prepare for a first headship had become compulsory. Since 2004 all aspiring first-time headteachers must have acquired this qualification prior to appointment to a headship.

This training provision in all four sectors was generally perceived to be relatively generic in content (which, as noted above, was also suggested in the NLDB documentation), and so not tied to reforms. Amongst the informants who commented on the nature of NLDB training, the large majority perceived it as a general professional development opportunity. Thus a
university pro-vice chancellor noted that LFHE provision ‘tends to be more sort of personal career based advice, rather than to do with specific problems or issues at the university’.

Table 5: Experience of training courses offered by NLDBs and other external providers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of training</th>
<th>Secondary Schools</th>
<th>Primary Care Trusts</th>
<th>Hospital Trusts</th>
<th>HE Institutions</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>NLDB for the sector or other training provider</strong></td>
<td>NCSL</td>
<td>other</td>
<td>NHSIII</td>
<td>other</td>
<td>NHSIII</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. informants with experience of training from NLDBs (and from other providers) in the form of:</th>
<th>1. senior leadership training</th>
<th>2. specific provision (e.g. for specialist role such as finance)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A small minority of informants had experienced other forms of external leadership development support, both from particular NLDBs and other providers. They included action learning sets, coaching and mentoring, and 360 degree appraisal. One was a hospital chief operating officer, who signalled a longer-term support relationship which had been maintained since changing health sectors: ‘I’ve had a...coach since I was appointed as a chief exec in a primary care trust in 2001. I will still use him periodically about once every six months, and he was recommended by the NHS Institute [NHSIII].’

Very few informants saw NLDB provision as promoting the implementation of government-driven reforms. A PCT director who did also saw it as offering a professional and career development opportunity:

Yes of course it was, because that’s what NHS chief execs are meant to do. NHS chief execs are accountable to the Secretary of State...but actually fundamentally what it was about was it was teaching you to be a - well, it was enabling you to find a place where you could be a confident, independently thinking and effective Chief Executive...It was also about helping me to build up further knowledge about myself, to help me move on in my career.

A school deputy headteacher pointed to the government concern with recruiting sufficient headteachers, rather than to the NCSL operating as a vehicle for specific reforms:

Fundamentally, it’s a kind of very expensive response to the fact that people don’t want to become headteachers in an education system where...[the role of] headteachers [has] become a thankless task...I perceive the National College for School Leadership as a kind of political response to the issues we have in education.

Thus the perception of those experiencing NLDB and other external leadership development provision was overwhelmingly one of the training and other support assisting their general professional learning. Insofar as the two government-established NLDBs (the NCSL for
schools and NHSIII for health) represent a technology of control, the perceptions of those with experience of their provision imply that these NLDBs are in themselves somewhat mediatory. Their provision is reported to be generic, and only obliquely related to reforms insofar as these happen to be the innovations which participants are tackling at the time.

**Impact of External Leadership Development: Acculturation or Cultural Reinforcement?**

Those informants who had experienced external leadership development provision were generally very positive about its practical value. Yet their accounts of its impact ranged from the broad and impressionistic to the highly specific. The reported impact on recipients’ self-perception as a change agent is depicted in Table 6. (These categories are not mutually exclusive, and individual informants may have mentioned more than one.)

Table 6: Perceived impact of external leadership development experienced

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NLDB for the sector or other provider</th>
<th>Secondary Schools</th>
<th>Primary Care Trusts</th>
<th>Hospital Trusts</th>
<th>HE Institutions</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NCSL other</td>
<td>8 (14)</td>
<td>6 (6)</td>
<td>4 (8)</td>
<td>18 (16)</td>
<td>36 (44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NHSIII other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NHSIII other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>LFHE other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

No. informants perceiving the impact of external leadership development in terms of:

1. practice as a change agent
2. informing thinking about practice
3. other (e.g. informing preparation for inspection)

Relatively ‘hard’ impact on specific aspects of informants’ practice as a change agent was reported by a significant minority across all four sectors. A hospital medical director had orchestrated a direct relationship with a key stakeholder group:

It has changed my approach. I suppose I’m much more aware of public health issues, and I’m much more prepared to go to the city council now. Whereas before I would have gone to the PCT, because I wouldn’t have been able to get to the city council, now I know I’ve got a route to the city council, where actually public health issues are probably dealt with in lots of ways, better ways. They’re talking about housing, sanitation, all the issues that actually cause people far more problems than whether or not they’re being vaccinated.

In a university, the director of personnel and staff development had increased the use of data to support negotiation with senior academic staff:

We’ve become a very data driven organisation...it’s much more powerful for me to be able to go out and say, “Actually, based on the opinion survey that we did, 80 percent of staff say they’re not familiar with the university’s goals and objectives...can you talk about why that might be?”
But the most common impact was reported to be relatively ‘soft’, to have influenced informants’ practice as change agents through informing their thinking - summed up by one school deputy headteacher as ‘making informed decisions rather than gut reaction decisions’. Another deputy headteacher who had experienced NCSL training noted how it more generally stimulated the process of practical reflection as a precursor for action:

Obviously it gives you the expertise, but also the capacity to reflect, and I think that’s probably one of the strengths of the leadership courses I’ve been on.....it’s not totally the input from whoever’s leading the course as the chance to actually think through ideas and come to your own conclusions on them, and having the space to do that is very important.

Whereas a director of primary care in a PCT pointed to the content of the new focus for thinking - here to challenge structural problems - that could inform adaptive change strategies:

Sometimes a programme...can actually leave you...with a higher degree of cynicism, because when you get more exposure to a system you realize...that there isn’t an answer; there isn’t someone that’s doing brilliantly and you can say, I want to be like them and then it will be alright...Probably the thing I would take from [the programme] would be greater confidence in questioning because of the recognition that the system is very much faulted, and that’s enabling in a lot of ways.

Finally, a few informants referred to very specific practical impacts, as where a school deputy headteacher learned from an NCSL training programme how to create an account of practice in terms that would meet inspectors’ expectations at a forthcoming school inspection.

Overall, the cultural impact of external leadership development was implied to be largely the reinforcement of recipients’ existing professional culture, but augmenting it through raising their awareness. No informants claimed to have had a ‘Damascus Road’ transformational experience of acculturation towards regarding themselves as conduits for central government reforms. The impact of this provision seems perceived amongst recipients as mostly quite diffuse and culturally superficial. Its impact will of course have been scant amongst the substantial minority of informants who had not experienced this provision.

The Irony of Instrumental Acculturation: Empowering Agents of Subversion?

It seems reasonable to conclude that the informants in this research had almost universally assimilated beliefs, norms and values about their role as leaders into their professional culture. The concept of leadership was the accepted descriptor amongst the most senior staff (and also distributed more widely) for their proactive orchestration of change across the four public service sectors. But external leadership development provision appeared to have made only a minor impact on their identity as leaders, reinforcing their professional culture rather than overlaying it through acculturation. The sources of their acculturation as leaders probably lay elsewhere in their wider professional and organizational socialization and their everyday exposure to popular professional and media discourses.

Indeed the metaphor of leadership, distinguished from the longer-established term ‘management’, has become widespread: across the private sector initially and, since the 1990s, in the public services. The emergence of leadership as a novel metaphor is associated
with leadership theory embracing the enabling notion of ‘transformation’ (Burns 1978), adopted amongst management theorists and practitioners alike to connote a form of visionary leadership that transcends immediate circumstances and is directed towards radical normative change. Arguably, it may serve to ‘gentle’ the earlier concept of management, which connotes ‘harder’, more directive and constraining control and is less concerned with step-change improvement than with maintenance of ongoing provision (Hoyle and Wallace 2007). This visionary form of leadership was soon associated with the cultural turn in management theory discussed earlier. As part of instrumental culture management, acculturators’ interests may be served where senior practitioners come to identify with being visionary leaders bringing about radical normative change, as long as the content of that vision lies within the parameters of change being promoted by acculturators.

But the expressed perceptions of informants suggest that, as a technology of control, instrumental acculturation is relatively weak and unreliable. Those who had experienced NLDB provision indicated that it was generic. Whether they had experienced external leadership development or not, most informants implied that they mediated reforms and also pursued independent agendas. Their accounts support an alternative conception of culture very different from the manipulable and unifiable version underpinning culture management. Individuals retain the power of reflection to assimilate new ideas presented through external leadership development into their existing professional culture. It may be modified incrementally and subliminally over time, as has happened with the emergence and diffusion of the metaphor of leadership. But the evidence suggests that culture is deeply conservative and not amenable to smooth and speedy overlay. Instrumental acculturation employs conservative means to achieve radical ends. Small wonder that in this empirical case it did not appear to bring swift and reliable results as a technology of control.

The relative uncontrollability of instrumental acculturation is more in tune with the ‘ambiguous’ view of culture (Meyerson and Martin 1987; Hoyle and Wallace 2005). This view conceives beliefs, norms, values and underlying codes of behaviour to be characterized by vague and often multiple meanings, enduring divergence as well as confluence of interests, and continual flux with the evolution of experience and interpretation. Since culture is perennially ambiguous and evolving in myriad small ways, the attempt to change it in a direction which may seem clear enough to acculturators simply adds to the ambiguity experienced by target recipients. They retain the power to mediate. The ensuing cultural shift may be disparate or even subversive.

Speculatively, the government focus on leadership for implementing reforms may be generating the ironic unintended consequence of fostering its own mediation. Raising the awareness of leaders’ potential for envisioning, initiating and steering change may be acculturating them towards harnessing this potential to express their longstanding professional service values. It may happen through their selective adaptation of reforms to their local circumstances alongside the pursuit of independent change agendas. Developing the capacity for public service leadership may thus be developing the capacity for adaptation or subversion.

Yet the irony may ultimately be beneficial for policy-makers. Adapting reforms may make them more workable in the diverse contexts of individual service organizations, for which the relatively abstract formulation of national reforms cannot allow. Taking independent initiatives may empower service organization leaders simultaneously to pursue incremental, local context-sensitive improvement driven by their professional culture and more or less
adaptable reforms. In sum, creating conditions that raise leaders’ awareness of their own agency (or capacity to choose between alternative courses of action) may encourage them fully to deploy their power to mediate. So paradoxically, instrumental acculturation promoting leadership could turn out to work for policy-makers precisely because it doesn’t.

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