Contextualizing Leader Dynamics: How Public Service Leaders Endeavour to Build Influence

Mike Wallace and Michael Tomlinson

August 2008

First author, and author for correspondence:

Prof Mike Wallace
Cardiff Business School
Cardiff University
Colum Drive
Cardiff CF10 3EU

phone: 029 208 75848
fax: 029 208 74419
email: wallaceam@cf.ac.uk

Second author:

Dr Michael Tomlinson
Cardiff Business School
Cardiff University
Colum Drive
Cardiff CF10 3EU

phone: 029 208 74674
fax: 029 208 74419
email: tomlinsonmb1@Cardiff.ac.uk

Mike Wallace is a Professor of Public Management at Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University. He researches the management of complex and multiple public service change in a context of high accountability and permanent reform. He is currently directing the ESRC-funded project ‘Developing Organization Leaders as Change Agents in the Public Services’. He recently held an ESRC/EPSRC Advanced Institute of Management Research (AIM) Public Services Senior Fellowship to examine the management of complex and programmatic public service change. He is also Associate Director for Capacity Building within the Advanced Institute of Management Research (AIM).

Dr Michael Tomlinson is a Research Officer for the ESRC-funded project ‘Developing Organization Leaders as Change Agents in the Public Services’, focusing on secondary schools and healthcare organizations. He is based at Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University. He previously held an ESRC Postdoctoral Research Fellowship in the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University on work, employability and careers progression. His research interests span public service leadership, graduate employability and work-based learning. He takes up a lectureship in the School of Criminology, Education, Sociology and Social Work at Keele University in September 2008.
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ABSTRACT
A conceptualization of the dynamic relationship between leadership context and leader activity is developed, informed by structuration theory and illustrated through qualitative research on organization leaders’ perceptions in the English public services. It is argued that while the significance of context for leader activity is increasingly acknowledged, the variable extent to which leaders endeavour to manipulate contextual factors within structural parameters remains under-theorized. A heuristic conception of leadership context is articulated, linking the degree of leaders’ agency and its delimitation with the degree of manipulability of contextual factors. Indicative factors drawn from the research show how leaders from different public sectors perceived the manipulability of different contextual factors. One detailed case illustrates the cumulative and recursive nature of the context-leader dynamic. The paper concludes with reflections on the picture of contextualized leader activity that this approach provides and its implications for further theorizing, research, and policy for improving leadership practice.

KEYWORDS
contextual manipulability, leader dynamics, leadership context, leadership theory, public service leaders
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Leaders Make Things Happen...

Our purpose is to contribute towards understanding leadership as endemically contextualized by viewing context and leader activity as variably interpenetrative, dynamic and evolutionary. Specifically, we conceptualize how, and within what limits, leaders incorporate context into their activity: attempting to make things happen through manipulating contextual factors as a means of expanding their influence. Context may be productively conceived as part-socially constructed (Grint, 2005): constitutive of the instrumental goals that leaders pursue today to generate and sustain maximally favourable conditions for pursuing their goals of tomorrow. We will put forward a conceptualization of context and leader dynamics informed by structuration theory. Its application will be illustrated through research into the perceptions of organization leaders in the English public services. Our aim here is to illustrate how the degree of context-leader interaction varies along a dimension between the ‘readily manipulable’ to the ‘not manipulable’ because unthinkable (rather than attempting a deeply contextualized account of leaders’ experiences). We briefly consider implications of our conceptual orientation for further research and theory-building on the still more complex interrelationship between context and leadership, incorporating the rest of the leader-follower/collaborator-context nexus.

Early pursuit of universal (and so decontextualized) generalizations about leadership effectiveness was supplanted by a growing recognition of context as a mediating variable affecting leader action and follower response in classic leadership theories: whether linking
situation to leadership style (e.g. Fiedler, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969; House, 1971) or collective moral purpose to transformative intent (Burns, 1978)—driving Bass (1998) to rule out as ‘pseudo-transformational’ any leader activity where goals serve their self-interest by exploitatively warping followers’ morality.

Common experience, research (Bryman, 2004; Hunter et al., 2007) and theory-building (Osborne et al., 2002; Van Wart, 2003) together suggest that one leadership context is simultaneously like all other leadership contexts, like some other leadership contexts, and like no other leadership context. Alongside a few universals, such as leadership constituting a group phenomenon (Northouse, 2007), the sheer ‘contextual complexity’ (Brunner 1997) of diverse leadership settings and tasks render determining what works, when, how, and according to whom near-impossible—beyond a high level of abstraction with little potential for guidance. The bulk of leadership studies emanates from North America (Lowe & Gardner, 2000; Bryman, 2004). What has actually been grounded in a restricted range of (typically North American business) settings has too often been presented as universal, or remains silent about the lack of application to other (sectoral, national or cultural) settings.

With greater acknowledgement of the contextualized nature of leadership, interest is emerging in the development of a contextual orientation that brings to the fore key factors surrounding leaders and their relationships with followers. Even here, context tends to be seen as external to and impinging on leadership (Johns, 2001; Osborne et al., 2002), rather than being construed as partially endemic and partially implicated in a two-way causal relationship with leadership. Witness Hunter et al. (2007: 439): ‘Noticeably absent from the typical leadership study is a consideration of the context in which leader behaviors are occurring as well as the extraneous variables that may be operating within that context’.
Depicting context as ‘out there’ underplays how leadership is ‘situated’ (Grint, 2005). Leaders proactively ‘read the situation’, interpreting their context and mediating it through their attempts to shape contextual factors that are manipulable, and feeding back the consequences of their actions into this context (Mowday & Sutton, 1993).

...But Things Make Leaders Happen too

Conceptions of leadership tend towards the voluntaristic, imbuing leaders with agency--or choice among courses of action (Giddens, 1984)--giving them scope for alternative interpretations and practices. The extent of leaders’ individual agency has received more attention than its limits, as with transformational leadership where leaders are assumed to have choice over their vision and its implementation. But how much choice? Increasing attention is now being accorded to the ‘embeddedness’ of leaders in general (Whittington 1992; Collinson & Grint, 2005) and ‘top’ leaders of organizations in particular (Storey, 2005) within their wider political, economic, social and technological milieu, implying some interpenetration of context and leader activity.

In many contemporary settings, not least the public services (Author, 2003, 2005), organization leaders are embedded as ‘piggies in the middle’ of a state-sponsored, multiple stakeholder-governed, multi-organizational, professionally-staffed system. Leaders’ vision and practice must comply with parameters imposed by their political masters. Nowhere more so than in England under a New Labour government whose ministers’ ‘hands-on’ management of public service reforms has forcibly delimited the agency of organization leaders (e.g. Blackler, 2006; Currie & Lockhart, 2007). In addition, leaders’ agency is variably delimited by professionalized staff inside their organizations who expect and protect
a significant measure of individual autonomy (e.g. Hoque et al., 2004; Ferlie et al., 2005). Further, public service organizations do not operate alone. Expanding emphasis on ‘joined-up’ provision of seamless multiple services entails inter-organizational, and even inter-service collaboration (e.g. Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Crosby & Bryson, 2005) where power sharing delimits individual leaders’ agency in respect of their own organization while enhancing their agency in respect of other organizations in the collectivity. Thus to be reasonably comprehensive, a contextual orientation should take account of the things that make leaders happen (Bolman & Deal, 1991), alongside contextual factors that leaders can easily—or just possibly—manipulate.

Our research suggests that it is fruitful to conceive context as a mixture of factors which leaders generate and shape, and those which frame leaders’ activity. We construe leaders as both context-creating and context-dependent as they proactively negotiate the more structural aspect of contexts within which they work. They may seek to draw on the creative and evolutionary use of agency, acknowledging explicitly or subliminally that it is delimited by some structural parameters, yet remain unaware of others that may be observed to frame their thoughts and deeds.

The remaining sections develop and ground our argument. First, we offer a conception of leadership context as a heuristic linking the degree of leaders’ agency and its delimitation with variation in the manipulability of contextual factors. Differential manipulability as reported by informants portray indicative factors from our research. Second, we briefly summarize the empirical investigation. Third, we apply our conceptualization by reporting how leaders from different public service sectors perceived the manipulability of various contextual factors. Fourth, we take one case in depth to illustrate the cumulative and recursive
nature of the context-leader dynamic. Finally, we reflect on the novel conception of contextualized leader activity that our heuristic provides and consider its implications for further theorizing, research, and policy for improving leadership practice.

**Context and Leader Dynamics**

Underlying the dynamics of leader activity is the assumption that leaders could potentially—but not automatically—make a difference. They might pursue different goals through different means, influencing followers to contribute to selecting these goals and working towards them more or less wholeheartedly. In other words, leaders have some capacity to choose goals and means of pursuing them. This potential for alternative ways of doing things, coupled with followers’ responses, provides a foundation for assessing leaders’ effectiveness. Leaders are thus accorded a degree of agency: they could do otherwise. In consequence, they pursue an evolving profile of goals, which may be variably diverse and diffuse, concerned with means and ends, pursued with equal vigour and hierarchically prioritized, sequential and coterminous, official and overt, unofficial and covert (Author, 2002, 2005). Over time, the consequences of pursuing earlier goals accrue to constitute part of the context facilitating (or inhibiting) the pursuit of subsequent goals.

However extensive the formal and informal power to choose goals and means, it is never unlimited. Not only do the intended or unintended consequences of earlier leader activity recursively form part of the structural order framing the range of later choices, but there are wider structural factors constraining or lying beyond the realm of choice possibilities. Giddens (1979, 1984) conceives the workings of agency inside structural parameters as a process of *structuration* through which social production and reproduction occurs (see also
Whittington, 1992). In this process leader activity both expresses agency, shaping aspects of the context that create conditions for the pursuit of goals, and is shaped by structural factors, of which leaders may or may not be mindful.

Giddens is concerned to avoid treating agency and structure simplistically as an ‘either/or’ dualism (either choice of action is unbounded or it is predetermined). Social systems (including public service systems) are viewed as patterns of social relations constituted through human agents. These agents’ activity is enabled or constrained by the structural properties of the systems defining the rules guiding action and resources empowering it. But rules can be broken, resources redistributed. Since social systems are the product of agency, they can be reworked through agency. So the relationship of agency to structural properties of social systems is that of a duality. Each variably implicates the other in a dialectical relationship which may be more or less agentistic or structurally delimited but never entirely unhindered or predetermined. There is always some potential for change. Insofar as leaders possess significant agency they are empowered to engage in a ‘dialectic of control’ (Giddens, 1979: 149) with other protagonists, instigating change and mediating that initiated by others. Thus while public service organization leaders are piggies in the middle of a system where they are subject to political pressure for reform, they retain sufficient power within the dialectic of control to take their own initiatives and mediate this pressure, as we shall see.

Consistent with the conceptual thrust of structuration, transcending simplistic dualisms has emerged independently as a concern for leadership studies. Fairhurst (2001) calls for theorizing to reach beyond unhelpful dualisms. An example might be the ‘leader-follower’ dynamic where analysis is confined to the activities of leaders to influence followers or (more rarely) vice versa. Depth of understanding flows from replacing ‘either or’ thinking with a
‘both and’ orientation. The latter may more effectively connect agency and structure as a duality: for our purpose here, as co-dependent features of leader activity. Drawing on a post-structuralist approach, Collinson (2005) argues similarly that leaders’ activities and the contexts framing them are increasingly blurred, multi-faceted and shifting. Positing leaders’ relationship with contextual elements as unitary, consensual and one-way becomes problematic when they are experienced as ambiguous and subject to multiple, and multi-directional, shaping—some flowing from leaders’ own endeavours.

Interest in ‘both and’ theory among analysts of public service change long pre-dates the contemporary focus on public service reform (Author 2007). Hargreaves (1983) mapped parameters of agency against the dynamic state and economic relationship within which it is framed. He employed the concept of ‘relative autonomy’ to grasp how educational institutions maintain relative independence, fluidity and professional jurisdiction within the wider auspices of dominant economic forces and imperatives. Relative autonomy implies elastic linkage: economic-state relations remain loosely-coupled while they lie well inside structural limits. Yet the closer state institutional activities approach the boundaries posed by economic imperatives—say, by demanding ever more public resources—the tighter coupling becomes as the elastic limits are approached. In a capitalist economy the costs of social reproduction must not be allowed to undermine the profitability of industrial and commercial production. The latter is the source of wealth which can, in part, be tapped for social reproduction through taxation which funds public services.

However, public policy is demonstrably not based solely on promoting social reproduction for economic ends: government ministers may urge organization leaders to improve service provision through diverse means (OPSR, 2002). Such leaders may be encouraged to take
local initiatives and even to challenge and modify existing policy—in ways that are not inimical to government goals for social reproduction, directed ultimately towards future economic prosperity in an increasingly global capitalist economy. Burgeoning academic interest in understanding the mobilization and mediation of public service reform resonates with structuration. Mediation at service organization level has been a persistent theme in the analysis of public professionals’ changing identity (Newman & Nutley, 2003; Wajcman & Martin, 2004; Gleeson & Knights, 2006). Our research interest lies here: in the elastic linkage spanning the loosest coupling where agency is in the ascendant to the tightest coupling where structural delimitation leaves minimal scope for agency.

The goals that the organization leaders in our study pursue are affected by the changing political economy surrounding public service reform. Different service sectors have undergone significant restructuring, not least in their relationship with state funding and the private sector (Moran, 2003). Such imperatives, coupled with dominant discourses of the knowledge economy, market-driven reform, global competition and technological change, form a backdrop which public service organization leaders have to negotiate. Most are facing policy pressures to extend accountability and marketization (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004). Political pressure for service improvement is linked closely with these imperatives, as well as social changes associated with changing modes of public choice and consumption. Yet the relative autonomy leaders have affords them a significant degree of agency to effect change and shape their organizational context. They may choose fully to embrace economic imperatives, downplay the significance of these imperatives for their organization, or emphasize other goals well outside the economic domain, thus making creative use of agency. The organizational context is, however, never divorced from a wider political and economic context which structurally bounds such activity.
In sum, leaders’ goal-achievement activity variably shapes some aspects of their immediate context and so generates part of the future context for subsequent activity, while variably being shaped by these and wider structural aspects of context. We conceptualize the agency-structure relationship in terms of complementary dimensions intrinsic to leader activity:

1. the *atemporal* dimension of leader’s agency linked to context manipulability and the specificity of the contextual factors concerned;
2. the *dynamic* dimension of cumulative and recursive manipulation of context to expand leaders’ influence.

In Figure 1 the arrow symbolizes the atemporal agency-structure dimension. Leaders’ relative degree of agency ranges from very high (but never absolute), through moderate (where structural factors become more salient but are still open to the workings of leaders’ agency), through very low (where structural factors leave only marginal scope for agency) to non-existent (beyond structural limits where agency is ruled out). The relative degree of leaders’ agency reflects the extent of their capability to manipulate different contextual factors which tend to operate at particular analytic levels. Examples of factors at each level are taken from our research and will be discussed later. Thus relatively high agency is linked with ‘readily manipulable’ aspects of the micro-level context, as with the factor of developing and harnessing support for a strategic organizational vision. Moving along the agency-structure dimension, the more moderate the degree of agency becomes and the more contextual factors become only ‘possibly manipulable’ where they operate at the meso-level. As agency becomes relatively low due to encroaching structural delimitation, leaders may be aware of ‘marginally manipulable’ contextual factors at the macro-level. While they may retain
sufficient agency to manipulate the way this factor impacts on their organization, they must nevertheless accept its import and operate within the limits it imposes.

(INSERT FIGURE 1)

Beyond the structural limits of agency, contextual factors that might be considered hypothetically for manipulation tend to be beyond leaders’ awareness—they are not manipulable because they are ‘unthinkable’. Of course the unthinkable can in certain circumstances become the thinkable and even the possibly manipulable—as in a social revolution—but this is not the everyday reality of leader activity which concerns us. Our conceptualization allows for the possibility that the precise mix of contextual factors that leaders will perceive as highly, possibly or marginally manipulable will vary across micro- to macro-levels, so affecting their profile of goals at any time. The research illustrates how there were marked differences between these profiles amongst leaders from different public service sectors, reflecting divergence in their sectoral histories.

What may happen over time is brought into the dynamic dimension. In Figure 2 time is symbolized as passing from left to right. The first column (Time 1) considers how leaders may try to manipulate contextual factors ranging from the readily to possibly manipulable, while being aware of other factors which they perceive as only marginally manipulable. The factors identified in Figure 1 arising in our research are used to exemplify those that may be salient along the agency-structure dimension. Our leaders reported how they had attempted to manipulate particular contextual factors early on in their present role. Doing so helped them to create and sustain more favourable conditions which would enhance their capacity for influencing their colleagues in pursuing future goals. The positive consequences of doing so,
from leaders’ perspective, are represented by the second column (Time 2). Here each of the readily to possibly manipulable contextual factors has changed cumulatively as a result of leaders’ earlier activity, now constituting part of the contextual platform on which they continue to build as they turn towards new goals. The context-leader dynamic is thus not only in part cumulative, but also recursive: past contextual manipulation feeds into present leader activity, and will continue to do so with the further passage of time. It should also be noted that leaders may remain aware of marginally manipulable contextual factors, continuing to accept that at most they may retain a little ‘wriggle room’ at the micro-level. (Any impact at the macro-level would flow from the aggregate of micro-level responses in organizations throughout this national public service, and beyond.)

While we have given examples of changes in contextual factors implying leaders’ success and so enhancing their degree of agency, it is equally possible that their manipulative failure could also cumulatively and recursively feed into present activity in an inhibitory way, reducing the scope of their agency. We mentioned above how leadership implies alternative choices about how to make a positive difference. The outcomes of these choices could turn out to have no effect either way, or a negative effect—as where followers do not ‘buy in’ to the leaders’ advocacy of a strategic vision, holding hard to their existing professional culture and denying the legitimacy of being influenced by leaders.

**Research Focus and Methods**
The data comprise 18 individual interviews conducted in the summer of 2007 with the incumbent of the most senior formal leadership position in organizations providing education and health services in England. Within these services we are investigating four sectors, of which one—higher education—is only part-public funded and the other three are fully public funded. The latter are secondary schools, primary care trusts (PCTs)—created in 2001 as part of central government-driven reform with the function of coordinating and purchasing local health care services—and hospitals. The interview subjects are:

- 5 secondary school headteachers;
- 5 university vice-chancellors;
- 4 PCT chief executives;
- 4 hospital chief executives.

These informants possess the greatest degree of agency in respect of change in their organizations reflecting their unique authority as the formal organizational leader, and so are most concerned with manipulating contextual factors.

Semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002) were designed to explore leaders’ perceptions about their role in contributing to the leadership of change: whether linked with government-driven reforms or independent change agendas. Qualitative data analysis techniques were informed by the work of Huberman and Miles (2002). Transcripts were coded using HyperResearch software and analyzed according to pre-specified research questions and emergent themes, including leaders’ attempts to manipulate contextual factors. The interviews formed part of a wider investigation (title and name of funder withheld) that explored how far leaders and aspirants perceive themselves as
government change agents for implementing reforms, as relatively autonomous change agents for alternative agendas including local and internal initiatives, or both.

Leaders’ Accounts of the Variable Manipulability of Contextual Factors

Here we portray how the relative degree of agency possessed by our informants from the four public service sectors was reflected in the range of contextual factors they attempted to manipulate or perceived to lie outside their jurisdiction. A sequence of sector-comparative tables examines the atemporal dimension of leaders’ agency. Table 1 summarizes the proportion of leaders in each sector who mentioned the contextual factors in our first three categories. All leaders referred to one or more readily, possibly and marginally manipulable factors, suggesting that engaging with contextual factors of variable manipulability was a common experience. Yet the most salient factors also differed between sectors, as with the divergent emphasis on strategic vision.

(INSERT TABLE 1)

The remaining tables and accompanying commentaries qualitatively contextualize these summary figures. For each cell of the tables we offer a heuristic judgement of the relative degree of agency that leaders in each sector perceive themselves to have for each factor in turn, supported by a phrase indicating the evidence-base.

Addressing the readily manipulable
At the high agency end of the atemporal dimension, our informants perceived themselves to be working in a context which was fluid and manipulable, so capable of yielding immediate and tangible change. Five contextual factors were mentioned by most informants from most sectors. These factors involved leaders’ efforts to orchestrate independent and organizationally-initiated changes subject to minimal constraint, all of which could help to create favourable conditions for pursuing educational or healthcare goals:

1. the development of a strategic organizational vision which constituted the template for more specific goals, and which further shaped the overall organizational orientation towards the direction and management of change;
2. the development of locally-driven initiatives based principally on instigating organization-specific changes and re-working existing resource and operational structures to facilitate the development of new working arrangements;
3. a selective response to and adaptation of wider policy based on a creative mediation of salient policies to suit their contingent circumstances;
4. the allocation of resources within the organization;
5. the development of organizational management arrangements.

Table 2 illustrates the extent to which leaders worked on what they regarded as readily manipulable contextual factors, linked to their degree of agency. While there are similarities in leaders’ perceptions across sectors, there are also sector-related variations in the degree of manipulability for each factor. Thus in schools, developing a strategic vision was perceived as an aspect of context where leaders could draw on a very high degree of agency in effecting organization-wide change. Strategic vision was crucial to forming an organizational template which anchored local initiatives and provided a platform for the pursuit of future goals.
However, leaders in PCTs possessed only moderately high agency: their scope for visioning and embedding organizational values was constrained by pre-defined and largely state-driven imperatives, though they still retained substantial jurisdiction to push through locally-driven initiatives.

(INSERT TABLE 2)

Indeed, leaders across all four sectors reportedly enjoyed sufficient relative autonomy to generate a wide range of local initiatives and to find creative ways of adapting and appropriating wider external policy pressures. They perceived this thrust as a key feature of their leadership role and often distinguished it from the more operational, task-specific functions of management. University vice-chancellors in particular saw themselves as having a significant role in agenda-setting, shaping local policy frameworks and re-shaping existing management arrangements. Such perceptions were premised not only on the semi-autonomous status of universities, but also on the retention of significant jurisdiction in brokering change agendas. The shaping, manipulation and influencing of micro-level aspects of context represented a salient feature of their activities:

When I came here I thought that...the university needed to change, and I was of the view that that was also the opinion of the people who appointed me, and in particular the lay members of the university. And indeed the lay members of the university made it very clear that that was their view.

Such convictions were also evident in leaders’ attempts to mediate government policy according to their professional beliefs and values. Many saw themselves as having a key role
in contextualizing external pressures and making them meaningful for their organizational members. As one headteacher commented: ‘Hopefully we’re able to make sense of those [external pressures] and interpret them in a way that kind of filters it for the institution because really the change that we’re driving comes from inside.’

Likewise hospital chief executives reported working adaptively with the policy context: minimally, considering which aspects of reform to focus on, and maximally, working out how to appropriate these aspects for their own hospital setting. As in the other sectors, they worked to overhaul the management arrangements as a means of assisting the implementation of change. One had been involved in a merger:

...The two hospitals into one, the work that we’ve done in changing some of the service, they’re all outside government policy. They’re in the line of government policy but that’s the trick isn’t it? How you adapt what you want to see for your organization, describe it in the line of government policy, is the essence of public sector management.

Taking on the Possibly Manipulable

At this level of context there was more moderate scope for agency, but enough to make the effort of context manipulation worth trying. Achieving influence was a tougher task because these contextual factors were at the meso-level, outside the domain of leaders’ authority and so contributing to the structural parameters framing their activity. The three contextual factors mentioned were:

1. the existing professional culture to which organization members subscribed;
2. the local context surrounding the organization;
3. relationships with intermediary organizations.

Table 3 depicts how the leaders variably reported working on these factors to build their organizational influence. The existing professional culture and values was a factor whose manipulability differed significantly between services and sectors depending on the extent to which the existing professional culture served to delimit leaders’ agency to effect change. Both school and hospital leaders reported having carefully to negotiate the response of wider colleagues to change agendas—particularly amongst middle managers (in the case of hospitals, clinical managers), who were used to working in ‘silos’ and were more change-resistant. University and PCT leaders viewed this factor as potentially more manipulable. PCT chief executive especially felt that the novelty of their organizations, recently created as part of government-driven healthcare reforms, meant that the organizational history was too short to have developed a deeply entrenched professional culture.

(INSERT TABLE 3)

However, the majority of school leaders perceived a tension between deploying a managerial strategy to effect change and the values and interests associated with long-standing professionalism (Author, 2008) in their organizations. Although headteachers regarded the scope for manipulating management arrangements as readily manipulable, their scope for manipulating their colleagues’ responses to them was an altogether harder task. Strategies for tackling it included fostering strong middle leadership teams which worked closely with the senior leadership team, and drawing on their own professional identity and experience to broker the acceptance of their change agendas. Similarly, university vice-chancellors
perceived the existing professional culture as a contextual factor as only partially manipulable because of the long-standing allegiance of academics to their discipline and the continued adherence to collegiality. But they mostly identified with this culture and tried to harness rather than compromise it through their leadership activities. In the words of a vice-chancellor:

I remember thinking that if you’ve going to change an institution you can’t come in and just throw the switch and suddenly things start to be different, because they won’t be. You inherit a group of staff, who’ve--in the case of this [university]--many had been here for a long, long time. They have got used to a very particular way of working. In their view they were doing OK--couldn’t understand why they were positioned where they were as a university.

Across all the sectors, leaders expressed varying degrees of antipathy towards the role of intermediary state agencies which played a significant role in resource allocation, local accountability and local framework-setting. Such bodies were seen as delimiting leaders’ agency to embark on service consumer choice and other change agendas. They also absorbed energy and time that leaders would prefer to have devoted to other change tasks. They were also aware of the financial and resource allocation constraints imposed by intermediary bodies which partially determined how their organization received. As one headteacher put it:

The government use local authorities as they’re conduit to schools. Because if I was in government I wouldn’t want to take the flack if anything goes wrong, and I’d like to have the man in the middle...I sometimes think that local authorities are the drag in all this.
All chief executives in the PCTs and hospitals implied that their agency was constrained by the imposition of directives from regulatory intermediary bodies, especially strategic health authorities. Such intermediaries were perceived as setting parameters for leader activity by establishing service benchmarks and authorizing hospital decisions on resource allocation. PCT leaders perceived a tension between nurturing commitment to the PCTs’ health-related goals of providing care more speedily to the local population and facilitating their acceptance of change on the one hand, and being constrained by rigid regulatory planning on the other. One PCT chief executive commented:

The agenda for change has been difficult, very difficult to implement, and interesting to implement because it’s a real example of Soviet style planning, you know? And it’s very confusing isn’t it? Are we being a market or are we being a monolith?

_Living with the Marginally Manipulable_

An array of macro-level contextual factors had already reshaped service provision through stimulating the government reforms, and now formed a structural framework within which organization leaders operated. Impacting directly on these factors at the macro-level lay beyond the scope of leaders’ roles. While they accepted the marginal manipulability of these factors, our leaders did not regard them as monolithic. So they sought to harness what agency they still possessed to make a difference at the micro-level.

Reference was made to four main macro-level factors, often with implicit acknowledgement of their fundamental interrelationship:
1. the shift towards globalization and an increasingly knowledge-based economy, which itself had far-reaching implications for the responses of public service organizations--particularly in the education sectors. Related responses included workforce reform, new skill demands and changing forms of educational credentials and professional development, alongside organizational restructuring and the move towards more flexible and efficient workplaces;

2. social change including new models of public choice and consumer sovereignty linked to the rise in market plurality;

3. an altered policy climate marked by the spread of quasi-market competition into public services, increasing the pressure on individual organizations to be responsive and accountable to a more discerning and active ‘consumer-citizen’. Government-driven reforms were designed to raise standards and efficiency and ensure progress through ongoing quality audits and the monitoring of service output;

4. technological developments including more complex administrative data management arrangements and new virtual learning spaces.

Table 4 highlights how these contextual factors most strongly framed leaders’ potential to effect change. Agency to impact at the macro-level may have been minimal, but there was more variable scope at the micro-level of each organization. The responses of leaders from different sectors to the effects of economic change on workforce and in labour market demands contrasted significantly. Leaders in the school and university sectors saw globalized economic change as forming a very strong structural backdrop to their work, which was largely impossible to manipulate. Their service provision directly concerned building the capacity of the UK workforce to compete internationally in this new economic environment.
Amongst these leaders the overriding response was to accept these factors as inevitably imposing a structural frame within which they must operate, endeavouring to do the best they could within the parameters set. As one headteacher acknowledged: ‘We have moved towards a knowledge-based economy and we know we have to produce a different type of learner from what we produced in the past. So much of what we are striving for is a response to that.’

(INSERT TABLE 4)

Such external pressure was less salient for their counterparts in PCTs and hospitals. The changing economy impacted more indirectly through setting resource parameters, including the increasingly internationalized labour market for clinical and nursing staff. Being located in a national public-funded health service sheltered these leaders from direct engagement with economic factors. The only hospital chief executive who referred to economic pressures was concerned about constraints on public spending to enhance health services, rather than the direct impacts of a changing economic context on the organization. While another hospital chief executive did discuss the increasing importance of engaging in new collaborative business partnerships, all the chief executives in both health sectors defined their core goals in terms of improving patient care.

However, the new policy climate was perceived by all hospital leaders as far-reaching. They felt pressured to meet stringent government targets for the speed of provision and quality of patient outcomes, and to comply with related stipulations of the government health department and the various health regulatory bodies. While relatively few leaders in any sector mentioned technological change as having a major bearing on their activity, they were
aware of its impacts on service provision—from on-line learning to more sophisticated health treatments—and used their agency to take advantage of the new possibilities presented. Living with the marginally manipulable thus had salience for all our leaders, largely constituting the ‘givens’ which they might at most be able to harness towards their organizational goals.

The analysis so far has created a snapshot illustrating the variable manipulability of contextual factors according to the relative degree of leaders’ agency and structural delimitation. In the next section we add a complementary focus on the dynamics of leader-context interaction.

How One Leader Built a Platform for Expanding Influence

How did the second, dynamic dimension of manipulating context operate? Our interview with one long-serving secondary school headteacher illustrates how aspects of context were worked on cumulatively as a means of building capacity for influence in the future, and how the results of earlier efforts fed-back recursively into later activity. Those contextual factors that were successfully manipulated from this leader’s perspective had the effect of altering the context itself, so facilitating the pursuit of new goals.

The headteacher had been in his present role for sixteen years and had inherited a reportedly ineffective senior leadership team. At the time of his appointment the school was underperforming, with low student attainment accompanied by low teacher morale. The students were all boys from a mainly working-class socio-economic locality. The headteacher had identified the readily manipulable aspects of context which he perceived to be amenable to manipulation. He also endeavoured to work as proactively as possible around meso-level
contextual factors, especially the existing ‘can’t-do’ professional culture, the constraints imposed by his local education authority, and the challenges posed by the local community which the school served. He accepted that change would be incremental, and was well aware of the structural macro-level contextual factors delimiting what he could do. But he attempted to avoid letting it impinge too heavily on his immediate leader activity.

The headteacher’s early context-manipulative activity had resulted in a flow of future-oriented interaction that had gradually created a stronger platform for setting new educational goals and arrangements for achieving them. One challenge in establishing his strategic vision was in bringing his colleagues ‘on board’. This vision emphasized both the goal of maximizing students’ educational potential and the means of achieving it, chiefly through nurturing a ‘can-do’ cultural shift throughout the school. His eventual success meant that teachers gradually accepted working within a changed context where commitment to positive change for the good of students and other staff was now the starting point for raised educational goals.

A range of local initiatives taken by the headteacher had also served to create a new context creating favourable conditions for future educational goal-related activities. He had actively restructured traditional forms of didactic and text-based teaching and learning by introducing interactive virtual learning material. He ensured that all staff had the appropriate training and facilities to use the material effectively. The effect on both students and teachers had proved largely beneficial, resulting in significant improvement in students’ attention, behaviour and learning outcomes. Crucially, these activities were underpinned by the headteacher’s earlier success in establishing more robust management arrangements, which had included building up strong senior and middle leadership teams capable of contributing their leader activity to
the implementation of these changes. He conceded that he was dependent on his colleague senior and middle leaders to assimilate and then promote the change agenda school-wide. The new management arrangements ran to keeping every teacher well-informed through new technology:

It’s a flat management structure, give them responsibilities, get rid of the paperwork, focus on teaching and learning in the classroom… I believe the teacher in the classroom should be—I use the analogy of a hospital. If you were ill, you’d want to go to the best hospital, with the best operating theatre, best surgeon, best nurses supporting it, best technology. That’s how I view the teacher. So, every one of our teachers has...access to all the information, every pupil, timetable, events log, everything, just on their computer, and parents have 24/7 access to that by something called e-Portal, via the web.

Through these micro-level initiatives the headteacher had productively deployed agency in seeking organizational advantage from the marginally manipulable contextual factor of technological change, over which he had no realistic control at the macro-level.

Over sixteen years his engagement with readily and possibly manipulable contextual factors had cumulatively and recursively extended and bolstered his platform for working with colleagues towards new educational goals. He had maximized his potential agency as a result, always subject to the structural delimitation of marginally manipulable factors. Far from being radically transformational, the leader dynamic expressed was iterative and incremental. By manipulating areas of context well within his jurisdiction the headteacher had generated new aspects of context within which new areas of agency could be applied. This illustration exemplifies why we contend that context should be conceived as partially fluid and
interactional: it can facilitate the emergence of new spaces for leaders to expand influence—as long as their efforts to manipulate contextual factors are successful.

**Realizing the Potential of Conceiving Context and Leadership as Interactive**

There is more to context than meets the eye of those who regard it as wholly external to leadership. First, the context of leadership was revealed by our conceptualization and illustrative data to be partially integral to leader dynamics, consistent with the emerging theoretical thrust to relocate context as both external and internal to the leadership nexus (Collinson, 2005; Grint, 2005). Our leaders, embedded in the milieux of different English public services, all worked to expand their agency through manipulating micro- and meso-level contextual factors. Further, they variably exploited what little agency they possessed at the micro-level in respect of marginally manipulable macro-level factors, whether by coping with them or more positively trying to harness them towards their organizational goals. Many aspects of context therefore exist in an evolutionary two-way relationship intrinsic to leader activity while others constitute an external structural framing that largely delimits these activities. None of our leaders denied the wider pressures flowing from changes in the global economy, nor did any ignore dominant political pressure for reforming their services. But, crucially, they all attempted to work creatively around these structural limits within the perceived parameters of their agency.

Second, the mix and import of contextual factors in our empirical settings was shown to be contingent on both individual organizational characteristics and sectoral history. Comprehending how leaders ‘read their situation’ (Grint, 2005) entails a sensitivity to those factors that are common to all situations, to some situations (as with the sectoral history), and
to no other situation (as with individual organizational features). So, articulating and winning support for a strategic vision made strong sense for secondary school headteachers in a sector where there is a long sectoral history of relative autonomy from local education authority or central government prescription. It made less sense for PCT chief executives in a sector whose history was extremely short: it had not only just been created by government policy but was also still being implemented.

Third, common to all sectors were the numerous aspects of context open to manipulation and so to leader activities which are potentially generative: their outcomes may facilitate the cumulative and recursive development of a platform for leaders to expand their influence. As Giddens (1984) contends, human agency involves choosing alternative courses of action according to the interpretation of a situation. Today’s choices may significantly alter the course of tomorrow’s action and the contextual arrangements that evolve as an intended or unintended consequence.

Fourth, by implication decontextualized theories of leadership are confirmed to be missing something that really does matter for grasping leader dynamics (and so the more complex nexus of leadership dynamics). An emphasis on engaging with context thus offers greater potential for a nuanced understanding of the contingency of leadership than continuing to pursue universality in the face of accruing evidence of contextual diversity.

Our conceptualization appears to offer a useful heuristic for exploring the complexity and contingency of context through an inclusive, ‘both and’ approach. The focus is multidimensional, embracing both the variable manipulability of different factors and the dynamic implications of manipulation efforts over time. Our modest ambition in the present paper has
been to make a start on interpreting leadership as both context-creating and context-dependent through a limited focus on leader dynamics. Clearly there is much more scholarly work to be done. First, theorizing needs to extend the focus to embrace the entire leader-follower-goal achievement nexus, both atemporally and dynamically. By concentrating so far solely on formal leaders, amongst the other significant elements of leadership that we have not brought into focus are the:

- responses of collaborators or followers and the initiatives they may take;
- range of both official and unofficial goals pursued by both partners to leadership;
- evolution of the profile of these goals;
- emergence of informal leaders--including equal partners and subordinate followers;
- hierarchical distribution (Gronn 2000) of leader activity both intra- and inter-organizationally;
- organizational type, individual organizational characteristics, and sectoral history;
- national setting and stage of economic development with their levels of resourcing.

Second, there is a rich vein for research in diverse settings which could begin to assess the generalizability of particular contextual factors and their manipulability. Great scope exists for small-scale doctoral research to fill-in some of the knowledge gaps about the context-leadership dynamic in different organizations. There is also an urgent need for larger scale academic research, especially longitudinal studies capable of tracking the dynamic dimension of leadership activity and its consequences contemporaneously over several years. Such longitudinal work could unpack the ebb and flow of leader-context interaction and determine the impact of leaders’ evolutionary successes and failures on their capacity for building future organizational influence.
Third, our context-sensitive approach to studying leadership has implications for policy and practice, not least the design and provision of leadership development, training and networking opportunities at different career stages. A productive focus could be on how to work consciously to build a platform for expanding influence. One means might be to maximize formal and emergent leaders’ potential for diagnosing and then productively manipulating readily and possibly manipulable contextual factors. Another might be to explore how even the most marginally manipulable factors might be harnessed in some way towards organizational goals within the strong parameters they impose.

Finally, we cautiously suggest that our approach has some promise in fostering leadership theory-building and research that is sophisticated enough to embrace diverse contextually-related things that leaders make happen and things that make leaders happen. It may be less ambitious than pursuing decontextual universality. But in a social world whose ‘contextual complexity’ (Brunner, 1997) is ever-expanding, it is surely a more realistic direction for informing the study and practice of leadership.

References


(5 author references withheld)
Figure 1: Linkage between leaders’ agency and the manipulability of different contextual factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of leaders’ agency and its structural delimitation</th>
<th>Extent to which context is manipulable</th>
<th>Level of analysis</th>
<th>Illustrative range of contextual factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>towards very high agency, very low structural delimitation</td>
<td>readily manipulable</td>
<td>micro</td>
<td>• strategic vision</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• local initiatives</td>
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<td>• selective response to policy</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• allocation of resources</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• management arrangements</td>
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<tr>
<td>moderate agency, moderate structural delimitation</td>
<td>possibly manipulable</td>
<td>meso</td>
<td>• existing professional culture</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• local context</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• relations with intermediaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>towards very low agency, very high structural delimitation</td>
<td>marginally manipulable</td>
<td>macro</td>
<td>• globalization and wider economy</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• policy climate</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• social change</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• technological change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-existent agency, beyond structural limits</td>
<td>not manipulable (because unthinkable)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(e.g. operation with potentially unlimited resources available)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2: The context-leader dynamic: building a platform for expanding future influence

Cumulative and Recursive Focus of Context-Leader Dynamic

**Time 1**

Leaders endeavour to manipulate contextual factors within the scope of their agency to build a platform for future influence...

- **Readily manipulable**
  - strategic vision
  - local initiatives
  - selective response to policy
  - allocation of resources
  - management arrangements

- **Possibly manipulable**
  - existing professional culture
  - local context
  - relations with intermediaries

- **Marginally manipulable**
  - globalization and wider economy
  - policy climate
  - social change
  - technological change

**Time 2**

If successful, leaders use manipulated factors as a platform for pursuing new goals and, as these factors evolve, leaders continue to manipulate them to maintain and further develop their platform...

- **Readily manipulable**
  - acceptance of vision facilitates commitment to new goals
  - implemented local initiatives create a supportive environment
  - implemented responses generate scope for choosing new goals
  - allocated resources provide a basis for current activity
  - implemented arrangements provide a basis for current activity

- **Possibly manipulable**
  - shift in professional culture facilitates commitment to new goals
  - shift in local context creates a supportive environment
  - good relations create support for current activity

- **Marginally manipulable**
  - Leaders remain aware of these factors but accept that they largely continue structurally to delimit their activity

- **Not manipulable**
  - (e.g. operation with unlimited resources)
  - Leaders remain unaware of these factors that continue to lie beyond structural limits bounding their activity

35
Table 1: The pattern of contextual factors mentioned by leaders from different public sectors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manipulability by leaders of different contextual factors</th>
<th>Secondary schools (5 head-teachers)</th>
<th>Universities (5 vice-chancellors)</th>
<th>Primary Care Trusts (4 chief executives)</th>
<th>Hospitals (4 chief executives)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Readily manipulable</strong></td>
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<td>• strategic vision</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>• local initiatives</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>• selective response to policy</td>
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<td>• allocation of resources</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>• management arrangements</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Possibly manipulable</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• existing professional culture</td>
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<td>• local context</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>• relations with intermediaries</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Marginally manipulable</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• globalization and wider economy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>• policy climate</td>
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<td>• social change</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>• technological change</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Not manipulable - unthinkable</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Readily manipulable contextual factor</td>
<td>Degree of agency (inversely proportional to structural delimitation) in different public service sectors</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>Universities</td>
<td>Primary Care Trusts</td>
<td>Hospitals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic vision (promoting and culturally embedding organizational values and goals)</td>
<td>Very High: School leaders are able proactively to articulate, develop and embed organizational values</td>
<td>High: University leaders are able to articulate goals but are constrained by the size and structure of their organization</td>
<td>Moderately High: PCT leaders’ attempts to establish their own vision are constrained by overriding government goals for the sector</td>
<td>High: Hospital leaders are able to articulate goals but implementation is constrained by entrenched organizational values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local initiatives (developing a range of initiatives outside the government agenda)</td>
<td>High: Leaders are able to generate extensive independent change, contingent on their ‘earned autonomy’</td>
<td>Very High: Leaders are able proactively to develop local initiatives, linked to perceptions that universities are semi-autonomous from government</td>
<td>Moderately High: Most of leaders’ attempts to establish local initiatives are related to government-led initiatives for the local health population</td>
<td>High: Leaders are extensively involved in service re-design and other independent changes, though often linked to government expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selective response to government policy (mediating and co-opting the government reform agenda)</td>
<td>Very High: Leaders have substantial professional jurisdiction selectively to adapt the policy agenda</td>
<td>Very High: Leaders perceive themselves as having extensive autonomy in filtering central policy thrusts</td>
<td>Moderately High: Leaders are keen to interpret the government agenda, but prioritize implementing the main initiatives</td>
<td>High: Leaders are able to develop flexible means of fulfilling policy directives, constrained by health outcome mandates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allocation of resources (channelling resources towards organizational priorities)</td>
<td>Very High: Leaders are able to channel resources effectively towards diverse school-based initiatives</td>
<td>High: Leaders are able to prioritize resources, within the constraints of funding sources and multiple demands across the organization</td>
<td>Moderately High: Leaders work proactively to channel resources, constrained by funding and commissioning arrangements</td>
<td>Moderately High: Leaders attempt to address allocative needs, constrained by funding shortfalls and stringent financial benchmarks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management arrangements (shaping senior and middle management teams, team building, distributive approaches)</td>
<td>Very High: Leaders are able to shape the culture of their senior teams, and broker change agendas through their close colleagues</td>
<td>High: Leaders exercise strong control over senior leadership teams, but are partially constrained by the complexity and size of their organizations and disparate faculty structures</td>
<td>Very High: Leaders are able to shape close-knit leadership teams, aided by the small organizational size and mutual steering of change agendas</td>
<td>High: Leaders augment strong, cohesive board dynamics., but there are some tensions with middle managers, clinicians and influential change resistors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3: Perceived engagement of leaders with possibly manipulable contextual factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Possibly manipulable contextual factor</th>
<th>Degree of agency (inversely proportional to structural delimitation) in different public service sectors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Existing professional culture</strong> (effecting change in the wider professional ethos and culture)</td>
<td>Moderate: Leaders’ efforts to oversee professional-cultural change are delimited by strong existing professional values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Local context</strong> (influencing the local context surrounding the organization)</td>
<td>Moderate: Leaders’ efforts to influence the local context are constrained by demographic factors, geopolitical forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relations with intermediaries</strong> (negotiating relations with intermediaries)</td>
<td>Moderate: Leaders’ initiatives are often regulated through Local Authority stipulations and school governance arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginal manipulable contextual factor</td>
<td>Degree of agency (inversely proportional to structural delimitation) in different public service sectors</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schools</td>
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<td>Universities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Primary Care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hospitals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Globalization and the wider economy</strong></td>
<td>Very Low: Leaders acknowledge the shifting economic context and its bearing on educational expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(influencing the economic context)</td>
<td>Very Low: Leaders accept large-scale structural shifts between universities and the economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very Low: Leaders show a limited response to economic change, although they are sensitive to financial boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very Low: Leaders show a limited response to economic change, although they are sensitive to financial boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy climate</strong> (shaping the policy climate)</td>
<td>Moderately Low: Leaders are keen to mediate and possibly feed back into reform, but are aware that the school reform agenda is directive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderately Low: Leaders are keen to influence the policy agenda, but accept changing funding and political expectations of universities to fulfil economic agendas</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Low: Leaders operate in a highly top-down, directive and initiative-based policy agenda with strong centralized control mechanisms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low: Leaders operate in a highly top-down and directive, fast-moving, sometimes incoherent policy context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social change</strong> (mediating patterns of social change)</td>
<td>Low: Leaders are aware of irreversible social change affecting the expectations of learners, parents and society</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Low: Leaders accept commercialization and commodification of higher education, and change in the student population through widening participation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Low: Leaders perceive the need to meet changing expectations and demands for immediate, localized and fit-for-purpose healthcare</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low: Leaders perceive the need to meet the changing expectations and demography of the healthcare population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Technological change</strong> (responding to wider technological developments)</td>
<td>Moderately Low: Leaders’ activities are influenced by technological developments in school organization and curriculum, which they aim to exploit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderately Low: Leaders variably engage with new virtual forms of learning and modes of working, which are seen as an opportunity to exploit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderately Low: Leaders perceive technological developments as offering challenges and opportunities for healthcare practice and procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderately Low: Leaders perceive technological developments as offering challenges and opportunities for healthcare practice and procedures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>