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Leading and leadership: Reflections on a case study.

Abstract

Aim: The aim of this case study was to explore if observing leaders in the context of their day-to-day work can provide an insight into how they lead in particular circumstances.

Background: The study was carried out in small organisation which was set up five years ago.

Methods: A case study methodology was used. Data was collected by field notes of non-participant and participant observations. Follow-up interviews were transcribed and analysed to contextualise the observations. A reflective diary was used by the researcher to add to the richness of the data.

Results: The data demonstrates how the leader responded in key circumstances during scheduled meetings with staff, interactions in the office and during coffee time. These responses are linked to literature on leadership in the areas of power, personal development, coaching and delegation.

Conclusions: The findings suggest that observing a leader in the context of their day-to-day work can provide evidence to validate what leaders do in particular circumstances

Implications for Nursing Management: The implications of the findings for nursing management are the opportunities to use observation as a tool to understand what managers/leaders do, how they manage or lead and why others respond as they do, and with what outcomes.

Keywords: Leadership, leading, power, observation, case study.

Introduction and Background

An attempt to narrow the focus on leadership studies is almost impossible unless you clarify in your own mind what aspects of leadership and leading you are exploring. In reflecting on my observations of a leader I focus on leading rather than the specific characteristics of leadership. According to Ribbins and Gunter (2002) leading is recognised by its detailed and contextualised accounts of what individual leaders do and why they do it in a variety of specific circumstances, how and why others respond as they do, and with what outcomes. This paper reports on the observation of a leader which took place in her office and the surrounds. In setting out to observe a leader I was very aware that I would just get a snapshot of this person's working day in her organisation so I could only make limited interpretations of her style of leading.

Sarah, who worked as a nurse manager for a number of years was now working in a high profile post which involved her being an advocate for a vulnerable age group. I was interested to explore how Sarah had adjusted to this position as it was very different from her work in a large bureaucratic hospital setting. In recruiting staff for the office she explained that she actively recruited staff with the expertise to work with the client group in question. Her senior management level comprised an assistant, two investigators, a Head of Research and Policy and a Business Co-ordinator. In explaining that she reported directly to the Houses of Parliament she suggested that this had some benefits and costs.

The paper argues that observing a leader in the context of their day-to-day work can provide evidence to validate what leaders do in particular circumstances. The case study was supported by follow-up interviews with the leader to clarify any issues raised in the observations. I draw on field notes and verbatim quotes from this

experience, connecting what the leader says in the context of what she does. The observations noted and quotes transcribed are linked to some key writings on leadership and leading.

Methods

Using the case study as a research strategy can be challenging. According to Bassey (2007: 143) a case study is ‘...an empirical enquiry which is conducted in a localised boundary of space and time...into interesting aspects...’ He provides a number of key descriptors which fit with a rationale for the case study presented here in which the researcher was able to: explore significant features of the case, create plausible interpretations of what is found, test for the trustworthiness of these interpretations, and construct a worthwhile argument or story. The type of case study carried out here is explanatory (Yin, 1984) or instrumental (Stake, 1994). It examines a case in order to gain insight into an issue, i.e. leading and leadership.

Case studies have been used to establish cause and effect in research and they have been recognised as having the advantage of observing effects in socially constructed contexts. Adelman et al (1980) suggest that their particular strength can be linked to their attention to the subtlety and complexity of the case in its own right and that they allow readers to judge the implications of the study for themselves. Other strengths associated with case studies are that they catch unique features that may otherwise be lost in larger scale data, and they provide insights into other similar cases and can embrace and build in unanticipated events (Nisbet & Watt 1984). In contrast they have also been criticised for being impressionistic and biased (Shaughnessy et al (2003), personal and subjective and results may not be generalisable (Nisbet & Watt

1984). In locating my interpretations of the observations and interviews with Sarah I chose the definition of observation by O'Leary (2005:119), which describes it as 'A systematic method of data collection that relies on a researcher's ability to gather data through their senses within real-world contexts'.

I particularly like this definition as it highlights the importance of context. To understand my interpretation of leading, a contextualised account of the setting is vital. I was a non-participant observer, for the most part, drifting into a participant observer for fifteen to twenty minutes of the coffee break. I entered the scene with knowledge of what I wanted to observe and why. My questions included: what is her office like? How did her office grow from one to fourteen staff, in particular, how did she set about recruiting staff and what attributes was she seeking in her team? Key issues I hoped to observe were her interactions with the staff and their interactions with her. Prior to the observation I reflected that being an outsider researcher would help me to have more of an inquiring mind but the observation would need to be located in an understanding of the broader background of the set-up of this organisation.

The two meetings I observed took place in Sarah's office in the morning time. I hoping that as a non-participant observer I would be the invisible researcher in the corner attempting not to influence the interactions of the leader (Moyles 2007).

Results

My observations of Sarah during the period as non-participant observer and participant observer demonstrated a strong emphasis on relationship skills. From the

moment I arrived at her office I noted how Sarah and Martha (her Personal Assistant) interacted. They seemed at ease with one another. Their greeting to me was warm and friendly with good eye contact at all times. When Sarah later brought me downstairs to the coffee room I noticed her ease with meeting staff along the way and introducing me to them. In the coffee room some staff were already sitting around chatting. When we arrived Sarah was greeted on first name terms and I was introduced. Everyone made their own coffee and there was no sense of discomfort with our presence. I recorded in my field notes:

This seems to be a regular break when all meet together is a bright, spacious coffee room. There is tea/coffee and a birthday cake (which was for one of the staff from yesterday)... Got talking to some of the staff, when Sarah was busy with others, who said that they loved working there.

Reflecting on this observation I was reminded of the primal dimension of leadership and leading as described by Goleman (2002: 5) ‘...the leader has maximal power to sway everyone’s emotions’. The idea of celebrating staff’s birthdays lead me to believe that relationships were important in this organisation. This viewpoint was further reinforced during my non-participant observations of Sarah’s coaching style in her meetings.

Following her meeting with Madeline she recalls:

So I suppose I have to keep a distance from her in that sense and that’s why I’m talking about a monthly meeting so that she is bringing to me reports on

preliminary examinations when it is at a first stage and I suppose I'm giving guidance on it but I'm also challenging her ...

In her second meeting she recognised that she was at the other end of this guidance with her advisor as she recalls:

...she is in a position that none of the others on the management team are at where she actually gives *me* advice. None of the others have a position of giving me advice

Goleman (2002) believes that the positive impact of coaching stems from the empathy and rapport that a leader establishes with employees. A good coach can communicate a belief in people's potentials and an expectation that they can do their best (as in the first meeting with Madeline). Closely related to this recognition of a coaching need was Sarah's self-awareness of her own strengths and limits. She recalls in the interview after her meeting with her adviser '...I recognise that she has expertise that I don't... So it's recognising that she has a lot more experience than I have...' In this recognition Sarah explained to me before our meetings that she was organising her own personal development and refers to this again after the meetings:

I'm conscious that as a person that reports to the House of Parliament that I don't have an immediate boss or an immediate manager who's managing my performance so what I'm doing is setting up a structure for myself where I'm going to have an external mentor. I suppose what I want is someone externally with a watchful eye on me to make sure a) I'm developing and b) that I'm

doing the things you'd normally do in an organisation if you did have a manager or a boss because it's very easy in this job to do what I like.... I'm trying to identify my blind spots in terms of my own development.

Although she felt autonomous to a certain degree she also felt that she could become demotivated if she did not actively pursue her own personal development. According to Goleman (2002) leaders with high self-awareness typically know their limitations and strengths and welcome constructive criticism, for example, Sarah states 'I would have huge respect that if they say something to me, even ... you could be clearer about your expectations'.

From self-awareness comes self-management. Goleman (2002) suggests that self-management resembles an ongoing inner conversation; it allows mental clarity and concentrated energy demanded of a leader. By staying in control of feelings the leader crafts an environment of trust and fairness. The transparency of self-management allows integrity or the sense that the leader can be trusted. In summary, these leaders can control their own state of mind, managing their own turbulent feelings while allowing the full expressions of positive emotions. In my brief window of opportunity to observe Sarah and her staff this positive atmosphere seemed to abound. The new leaders know themselves intimately, their strengths and weaknesses and they understand their relationships with their staff.

In observing Sarah (S) I was aware that I was interpreting the situation as it occurred. For example when she was meeting Madeline (M) I noted that:

The seating arrangements suggested that M & S were quite

comfortable with each other. They sat facing each other at the top of the table. There were smiles and mirroring of body language.

My interpretation of this observation to Sarah in an audiotaped interview following the meeting was that there didn't seem to be any tension, between Sarah and Madeline. When she came with her proposal I observed Sarah to be quite encouraging in what she had written and what she was proposing to do. Sarah's response to my interpretation was

...I really enjoy staff development. I'm comfortable with encouraging M to present something herself, and that I facilitate, it's probably from my (previous) experience.

The interview helped to reaffirm my interpretations or to clarify any misinterpretations I might have in depending on observation alone. Bush (2007) highlights the difficulties in achieving reliability in observational research. He suggests that if the observation had been made at a different time, the event itself could have changed. There may have been different agendas and the participants may have brought different thoughts and feelings to the meeting. I could identify with this viewpoint as Sarah had organised the meetings for me to observe on the morning chosen. I clearly perceived this situation as a comfortable one between Sarah and Madeline but can now, on reflection, ask myself if I observed what I expected to observe. Moyles (2007) identifies this interpretation as a significant challenge when we want to step outside our roles and objectively observe phenomena. In an effort to validate my data I sent a copy of the transcripts from the two interviews to Sarah

within a few days of the observations. She agreed that these represented her viewpoints.

Sarah's office was located on the first floor away from the open plan offices downstairs. Perhaps this could be interpreted as a balancing between distance and closeness. It was a big bright office with a glass partition onto the corridor. It was furnished with a large semi-circular desk, where Sarah had a computer, phone and some documents. The office had a large oval table which was used for meetings. There was a separate area with armchairs and a coffee table for less formal meetings. Behind her desk was a large black and white mural of people who represented her client group. This organisation of her office space may reflect values she held about keeping control of her work and at the same time creating space and a setting conducive to an appropriate interaction with others. Immediately I felt a sense of client centeredness, which reflected what her role was about. She had recently completed a personal development plan for herself, via a 360 degree feedback (feedback from multiple sources) and had set up a system of having a personal mentor. The concept of performance management is an aspiration that she hopes to introduce to staff in the office and she hopes to facilitate them with their personal development.

Before addressing the challenges of linking my observations with the concepts of power and influence I acknowledge that many ambiguities exist in the literature regarding these terms. In an effort of transparency I present my observations and some verbatim quotes from my data so the reader can decide if these examples link to power and influence.

S welcomes me and invites me to sit at the oval table, we sit opposite each other. She suggests that she gives me some background to the office and explains that she has scheduled 2 meetings for the morning, 2 quite different ones that I can observe.

The office was approved and established five years ago without any location sanctioned. However, Sarah worked from her home until she found a building which could be used as an office. She related how she searched for a suitable office in a city centre location herself and then set about recruiting staff, which now numbers fourteen. In telling me about her staff as we walked from her office to the coffee room she told me that she planned, from the beginning, to find staff with the expertise needed to work with her clients in defending their rights. This plan resonates with Ribbins' (2007) view that power can be regarded in terms of access to resources and/or as the potential to affect behaviour of others. Power is at its most effective when there is a clear goal in mind and the means for reaching it are already available (Belbin 2001). However, Belbin cautions that

Power on its own achieves nothing without the effective means of delivery.

Success will only come about through finding and employing talented people (p.87).

This concept about power being linked with resources fitted quite well with Sarah's office and staff. In the second meeting I observed the staff member (N) was an

advisor to Sarah. During the meeting it was clear that she was advising. I suggested that there was a sense of

...her taking the initiative on things ... she was taking a more strategic look...

Sarah's response to this suggestion was

I suppose I recognise that she has expertise that I don't. Her entire life has been spent in communications so she is very familiar with the media, and even though it's something that I'm becoming more familiar with I've only been doing this job really for 2 years. So it's recognising that she has a lot more experience than I have and also as an individual she is a very intuitive person so she makes decisions around the media and some of them are just 'Yes I think that would work'.

Belbin (2001) suggests that talented people are hard to manage and their creativity is curtailed if they are too closely directed. Sarah may have been cognisant of falling into such a trap when she stated during this meeting with her advisor 'That's me micromanaging' and 'Don't let me interfere'. I suggest that Sarah, in her position of power recognised that her advisor had the expert power. However, in not interfering in the decisions, which the advisor would make Sarah was giving her the authority to activate her expertise so putting her advisor in a position of influence. In discussing her relationship with her advisor Sarah volunteers the following

N would know me intimately in a way that I would never have a discussion with anyone, as I wouldn't need to, like my insecurities about doing certain things. So, say for instance N would say to me 'I think you should do 6 One... I have conversations with her and said 'I don't feel confident about doing that'. So we have had conversations about my own personal views on things that the others wouldn't know. Unfortunately I have to get my hair done, I have to wear certain clothes at certain times, so it's part of the package. And maybe it's an indication that you picked up on, of my reluctance of that whole public persona that I have to push myself and N is hungry for it so we meet in the middle.

Powerful leaders may be more likely to delegate and to acknowledge the expertise of their staff preferring to give some power to the staff they recognise as having more expertise than themselves. Bennis (2004) believes that it can be a real test for a leader to nurture those people whose stars may shine as brightly as or even brighter than their own.

Moving from the base of an individual's power (as in expert power of Sarah's advisor) to the scope of power a number of inefficiencies of power are highlighted by Belbin (2001). If power feeds on expansion then the wider the domain over which power operates the more difficult it is to coalesce *trust* and *control*. According to Belbin if the emphasis is on securing control, communication lines between the apex of power and its periphery lengthens, creating a lag. Sarah reflects her beliefs around control in the following:

So the decision to investigate something is always my decision and also I can't delegate the outcome of an investigation so M will do the work but the outcome is mine and it's not something legally I'm allowed to delegate.

Although Sarah has built up her office from one to fourteen she has explicitly stated that she wants to maintain a flat organisation structure. She was keen to remind me 'I have created my own culture' when presenting me with a copy of the organisation chart. Sarah highlighted the concept of trust in her meeting with Madeline – 'I trust her...I trust her intuition...' When I questioned her about taking annual leave the week prior to the launch of their annual report she says

But I suppose in terms of trust, I would have huge trust in them that that would be done while I'm away and N would then send me a pack to my house on Monday morning and then I'm back to work on Tuesday morning.

When I asked her if she had any issues about going away her reply was '...they do feel a sense of trust, that I trust them.'

Kanter (1979) argued that organisational power can grow if it is shared but she warns that delegation does not equate to abdication. Furthermore, in empowering others leaders can increase rather than decrease their power. A key duty of Sarah's position is to participate in public debate, promote public interest regarding key issues, and influence the attitudes of decision-makers and the public. In an organisation as small as her one she herself is not expected to take the lead in every situation. She has

actively recruited experts in a specialist area and is willing to give the lead to her staff when she lacks the knowledge or skills.

In my interview with Sarah and my analysis of my field notes there were some indications of her using management competencies. I noted the following during my observations when Sarah sits back into her chair with her arms folded and asks

Would it be useful to present a case study, you have a lovely case study, you could pull out the bits for learning...(M takes some notes)...there's a lot of learning there...what do you think?

Later in the conversation Sarah suggests

The day you ran the business meeting, I could see the learning. You might ask the others what they think.

When I suggested to Sarah that I observed her to be encouraging her response was

It may not be absolutely perfect and exactly as I want it, but sometimes, I think, you have to let her do it for a few months. I think there's an awful lot of learning in that for yourself, and she's a person that learns very very quickly.

My interpretation of this response was that she was coaching Madeline. In linking with the literature around leading and managing I was drawn to the competency

framework by Kent *et al* (2001). Here the authors separate the competencies for both as their belief is that in order to understand each we need to study the two processes in terms of their functions and then question the interrelationships between these functions. When Sarah suggested to Madeline to present a case study she was allowing her to have substantial responsibility in decisions and she was providing direction. Kent (2005) categorises these functions as managing competencies. It can also be suggested that Sarah was developing Madeline, was involving her in decision-making, creating ownership/commitment in others and delegating responsibility. These latter functions are listed under leading competencies by Kent (2005). This idea of separating leading and managing might make sense from a theoretical and conceptual viewpoint but in reality they exist within the one individual. Using the metaphor of Heifetz & Linsky (2002) when you are in a leading position you need to move back and forth from the balcony to the dance floor time and time again, every day, week, month or year.

On more than one occasion Sarah identified this in herself. During my interview with her after the first meeting I was clarifying why she stated there was a need for ‘...more discipline around investigations’. She states

...what we had were weekly meetings but we were talking too much and I was probably getting in to too much detail about complaints. It was largely because we didn’t have as many people as we have now. M had just one person working with her up until this month and now she has three so there’s no need for me to have that level of detail. There’s no need for me to micromanage. I need to be

here to support her but also to ensure that she knows exactly what it is she is doing.

This response could be linked to delegation, a characteristic that is categorised by Kent (2005) under both leading and managing. The recognition that Sarah does not need to micromanage suggests that she does not need to be involved in the operational issues of the office. She states this again in the second meeting later that morning 'That's me micromanaging'. Goleman (2002) suggests that coaches are good at delegating, giving their employees challenging assignments whereas in micromanaging they are simply telling people what to do. For some leaders micromanaging is used when they need to get to the route of a problem (O'Reilly, 2007). Maybe this sense of not needing to be physically present, as in her plans to take annual leave before the launch of the annual report, reflects the leading competencies of 'Creates ownership/commitment in others' (Kent, 2005:1016). In contrast to previous literature on leading and managing the emphasis in Kent's (2005) framework is on the personal qualities of the leader.

Conclusions

Understanding the context in which the leader exercises power and influence is crucial. Much of what we understand in the world around is coloured by assumptions and prejudices. Indeed many failures of leadership may be linked with misperceptions on the part of staff and the failure of the leader to recognise the context within which actions will be understood. Observing a leader in action in the context of their organisation is vital to identify how they lead their staff. However, observation alone may lead to misinterpretations unless there is an opportunity to clarify observations as

in a conversation or interview. It is too easy to jump to conclusions and interpret the data collected without validating this data with field notes and verbatim quotes. I attempted to provide an audit trail of how I accessed the leader, collected data and I documented the role I took as a non-participant and participant observer, and an outsider to the organisation.

My field notes and transcript suggests to me that Sarah encourages her staff to push themselves forward. The important point to note is if this is done in congruence with the organisation so that all are travelling on the same road. I believe the essence of leading which Sarah demonstrated is her relationship with her staff. In conclusion, I acknowledge that my snapshot observation was just that. My reflections of the experience were aided by presenting the experience to my fellow colleagues and tutors. Questions raised and clarifications sought allowed me to reflect deeper on the experience and I was thus able to link my learning to the literature. I believe that this qualitative data collection tool is a powerful one but one which I gained immensely from because of adequate planning and reading prior to the session. The quote by Lipham & Francke (1966:108) 'What you are speaks so loud that I can't hear a word you say' seems to capture the impact of the non-verbal behaviour observed and fits well with my experience. Observation of this leader in action demonstrated how she managed herself and her staff, reflecting on her own performance. This may be her strategy for facing the demands of her position, however, this exercise is one which could provide key learning for nurse managers and their staff.

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