

Leadership

What makes a good leader?

Carolyn Mason takes a look at different leadership styles and examines what attributes successful leaders have.

One of the most inspiring leaders I have ever met is a district nurse in a small rural Irish border town. Her office has one computer, but it is warm and inviting, and when you go in she makes you feel welcome and special. She is passionate about district nursing and her team. She has a clear picture of what she and her team are there to create: a community where vulnerable older people, people with chronic illnesses and people with disabilities and acute illnesses can be supported to live at home with the best possible quality of health and life, in sometimes isolated houses and farms with little social contact or help. What stood out for me was this nurse's enthusiasm. She seemed to have a special ability to see the potential and personal worth in each of the staff who worked with her. At the time I met her, she had encouraged every healthcare assistant (HCA) to keep a personal notebook. Each month, the HCA would read an article that related to her work, come and talk about it and then use it to develop the way she worked with her patients. The important part of this was the follow up: it was more than simply a tick in a jotter.

The district nurse team leader would sit with her staff member and talk through the rewards and problems in their practice, getting together to find ways to move forward. She described with pride the pleasure that these individuals would feel as they built up their skilfulness and confidence.

So what was special about this? At the time, in the early 2000s, the office and its lack of IT support could as easily have been viewed as backward. Clinical supervision was hardly new, and the common rules of teamwork applied.

However, this approach was strikingly honest, with an animation and fervour that that can be obscured by the rules of capability policies and the newer, sometimes tick-box, requirements of the knowledge and skills framework (KSF). The language was everyday, which is often more powerful (and more difficult) than falling back on health service rhetoric. The motivation was genuine and the realisation of people's development was human and rewarding. At the other end of the spectrum from the local and rural, I have worked in government along with other nursing officers, in positions that have a potentially powerful influence on health service policy and the implementation of government plans and the ways that nurses work. Health and social services policy, in my experience, is shaped first by the politics of the party to which the Minister belongs and, no less importantly, by that Minister's personal vision, priorities and sense of urgency. The Minister in turn is informed and guided by civil servants who, through the course of their careers, have normally moved across a variety of departments. This means that the only people in the policy decision making pathway who have direct experience of working with patients and with colleagues in service are the professional advisors: nurses, doctors, pharmacists, dentists and allied health professionals. That is why it is so important for nurses to be there, in the central government policy-making arena, to influence strategic decisions that may directly impact on the lives of nurses and the people they care for. It is absolutely critical that nurse advisers in government have visibility, credibility and voice. These nurses and their professional colleagues may be the only people who fully understand, from operational experience, the consequences of policies that look good on paper as a rallying call to the public, but which may be meaningless or unworkable in the complex world of primary care or hospital wards. Agenda for Change, Health for All Children, the new GMS Contract, the creation of community patrons, and community nursing strategies in all four UK countries are just some examples of central directives that have already shaped the working lives of community and primary care nurses.

Common traits

Bringing together different scenarios and people, what is it that characterises a leader? In your own world, who stands out as having something special that other people want to follow? Who are the people that make change happen? How would you describe these individuals?

Common traits, in my view and as reflected in the literature on leadership, are passion for the job, having a clear picture of where we want to get to, a special ability to share that vision with others, and, simply, a 'way

with people' that makes those around them feel motivated, valued and encouraged. Leaders will often go the extra mile for what they believe in. They have integrity and courage. As leaders, they will 'be there', actually going to the places where their voice can be heard, whether it is a staff meeting, a trade union rally or a classroom, and will speak out when others are quiet. Their voice will be effective more than loud, they will be unafraid to challenge, and when they make their case this will be driven by genuine commitment to the cause rather than by a desire for self-promotion.

Olivier (2004) says: 'the leaders of tomorrow will need to be ordinary human beings with extraordinary talents. The new leader will be both inspired and inspiring. They will be able to find and hold a vision while enthusing others to share that vision. They will be able to manage chaos and complexity while instilling enough stability to ensure smooth daily operations. They will be able to change direction at the drop of a hat... from one imagined future to another without losing the support of associates, staff, customers, suppliers and other stakeholders. And they will be able to manage creatively the emotional impact of constant change.'

Where do we find leaders?

Leaders do not necessarily work in 'top' positions. In nursing, we need leaders at all levels and in all of the locations.

This does not mean that everyone has to be a leader. Nor does it mean that a leader, as a single person, can make change happen on their own; in fact it is usually the opposite, change is most likely to be brought about and sustained when a group of people are working well together, and when a wide population of those affected by the change have had a chance to say what they think. At some point a leader may have to push forward changes in practice that not everyone agrees with, and this is where courage comes into play. Success is most likely when people are asked, informed and persuaded, rather than told.

Leaders are most likely to be successful in creating change when a cluster of small but significant things come together at the right time and through the right people to create a wave that tips the balance towards transformation. This is described in a fascinating book *The Tipping Point* (Gladwell 2000). He argues that big changes in fashion, society and culture have happened when three types of people come together. One type is the connector, who has 'a truly extraordinary knack of making friends and acquaintances'. Connectors genuinely like people, know folks from many different worlds and are good at bringing people together. Another type is the 'maven', who has a fantastic stock of knowledge about the subject and wants to tell you about it too; the type of person whom someone will tell you to look up, because 'they will know'. And the third type is the salesman: an effective and positive persuader who has a subtle energy, enthusiasm, charm and likeability that makes people want to agree. In short, the 'maven' is the data bank, the connector spreads the message and the salesman persuades everyone that it's a great thing to do. When these three come together and the time is right, big changes happen.

Joint effort

The key message is that leaders are most effective when they are working with a team of people who have complementary skills. It may be comfortable to work with a group of people just like yourself, but you are more likely to be effective in achieving change or finishing a project if your group includes a variety of personality types: the ideas person, the visionary, the person who counsels caution, the one who insists on thinking through every detail, the completer-finisher.

Leadership programmes almost always devote a large proportion of the available time to helping individuals understand their own strengths and weaknesses. Tools such as 360-degree exercises, psychometric tests like Myers Briggs, and personal coaching are widely used and most people find these enlightening. Self-insight is an important part of leadership. Good leaders will recognise their own skills and limitations and then surround themselves by others who are good at the bits they find difficult. As one leader that I know put it: 'Always employ people who are better than you'.

Another feature of leadership is that different kinds of leaders are right for different places and times. If your organisation is about to undergo major reorganisation, you might need a leader who is a driver - fearless and decisive. Once the reorganisation has settled, it might be time for a more steady, stable, guiding hand at the helm.

Olivier Mythodrama Associates (2001) have devised a fun way to look at this. They identify four types of leader: the 'good king' who maintains order, the 'great mother' who nurtures, the 'warrior' who forces action, and the 'medicine woman' who sparks change (Table 1). No one way is right. The good king and the great mother provide stability, whereas the warrior and medicine woman create change.

If the leaders of an organisation are on the static side of the grid, there is potential for too much order and nurturing, and people will become stale and drown in being over-looked after. On the other hand, if there is too much action and change, people may become burnt out.

Table 1. Four types of leader

Good King - Order		Warrior - Action	
Sets objectives	Deliberate	Inspiring	Motivated
Praises success	Precise	Persuasive	Forceful
Informative	Methodical	Selling vision	Task focused
Recognises effort	Analytical	Competitive	'Call to arms'
Authoritative	Logical	Strong willed	Rousing
Controlling influence	Assessment	Confident	Instils beliefs
Attends to detail	Practical	Challenging	Confronting
	Static masculine		Dynamic masculine
Great Mother - Nurture		Medicine Woman - Change	
Reassuring	Encouraging	Visionary	Animated
Supportive	Empathetic	Creative	Imaginative
Responsive	Sharing	Creates change	Inspired
Helpful	Relaxed	Adaptable	Paints pictures (with words)
Relational	Welcoming	Enthusiastic	Dynamic
Receptive	Builds trust	Demonstrative	Experimental
Radiates warmth	Develops others	'Sparky'	Dynamic feminine
	Static feminine		

Another approach to leadership that may be more useful: facilitative leadership is about empowering people to work together to achieve a common goal (Interaction Associates LLC 2004). Facilitative leaders are collaborative, strategic, receptive and flexible, thereby creating a safe environment where others can participate, contribute ideas, make decisions and share responsibility for success. The emphasis in facilitative leadership is on how the work gets done and on relationships, as well as on getting results. In facilitative leadership the steps for achieving change are to:

- Focus on results, and in addition, on process (how to get there) and on relationships
- Seek maximum appropriate involvement
- Facilitate agreement through discussion and by using tools such as prioritisation and polling
- Share an inspiring vision
- Design the pathway to action
- Coach those involved for good performance
- Celebrate accomplishment

Conclusion

Leadership is subtle but recognisable. It may be about being out there in front, driving new ideas and forcing the pace of change, possibly making history by doing something that turns out to be a turning point for a society or an organisation or a group. However, leadership is also about bringing people with you. Leaders may also be the people who orchestrate the way that a team works, drawing on everyone's strengths, facilitating participation and making people proud of what they give - brightening the future for everyone

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