

A Yearning for the Vast and Endless Sea: from competence to purpose in leadership development

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Introduction

The inspiration for this paper comes from a quote from the French aviator and author Antoine de St. Exupery (1900-1944) who wrote: *“if you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.”*¹

Whilst broadly redolent of transformational leadership² it strikes me that this perspective stands in stark contrast to the competency approach that now dominates the field of leadership development and assessment. St Exupery conjures up the spirit, emotion, passion and inspiration of good leadership yet leadership competencies fuel a predominantly ‘scientific’, ‘objective’ and ‘rational’ approach that promotes individual behaviours, skills, qualities, attributes and performance over and above collective social engagement – in effect revealing the tension between a ‘narrative’ and ‘machine’ logic of leadership³. Furthermore, whilst de St Exupery’s quote may imply transformational leadership it seems to point, more fundamentally, towards a need for transformational followership where people are liberated from traditional structures of control – if you ask a man to build a boat he will build a boat, if you inspire him to travel who knows what he’ll come up with!

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the leadership development industry remains wedded to a concept of leadership whereby it is seen to emanate from individual ‘leaders’, invariably from the middle or top of organisations. Whilst this approach may be inherently attractive to the holders of leadership positions - reinforcing their sense of being ‘special’ and offering organisations a sense of control - it rarely delivers the kind of transformational improvements hoped for. Without the active engagement of constituents throughout the organisation (be they ‘leaders’, ‘followers’, both or neither) performance is seriously constrained.

Increasingly academics are now arguing that leadership is “a social influence process through which emergent coordination (i.e. evolving social order) and change (i.e. new values, attitudes, approaches, behaviours, ideologies, etc.) are constructed and produced”⁴. Leadership, it is proposed, emerges from the interactions between people rather than from the specific capabilities of any single individual and contextual factors (such as physical surroundings; social, political, cultural and economic environment; organisational systems and processes) are regarded as essential constituents of ‘leadership practice’⁵.

From this perspective leadership does not reside solely within individuals themselves, ready to be released at the opportune moment, but rather arises through interaction with one's environment and connection to a sense of shared endeavour. In research with car assembly workers at the Volvo factory in Sweden, for example, Sandberg⁶ found work competencies to arise, not out of acquiring or learning a predefined set of capabilities, but as a result of the worker's conception of the ultimate purpose of his/her work. Thus, employees who regarded their job as producing cars designed to be safe developed different competencies to those who prioritised comfort or style. Within this context offering a forum in which to discuss and explore values and how they influence behaviour would be more likely to bring about an enduring change in performance than teaching new procedural competencies.

In this paper I will present findings and conclusions from a series of recent studies I have conducted with colleagues at the Centre for Leadership Studies at the University of Exeter in order to explore how we can reconnect with the insights expressed so eloquently in de St Exupery's opening quote. In doing so, I hope to reveal some of the mechanisms by which leadership development can become a vehicle for exploring individual and shared values, identity and purpose and finding ways of aligning these in a manner that seeks not to suppress or eradicate difference but rather to embrace it; of bringing about enduring change and empowerment through reconnecting people with a deep and profound sense of purpose. In doing so I will call for a shift from developing 'leaders' to 'leadership'⁷: from the development of the skills and competences of individuals to the facilitation of dialogue, experience, relationships and the recognition of shared values and purpose within and beyond organisations.

The Competency Approach to Leadership

The leadership and management competency movement has its origins in the changing economic and political climate of the late 1960s and is heavily shaped by the work of McClelland and the McBer consultancy group in the US during the 1970s. Boyatzis defined a job competency as "an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to effective or superior performance in a job"⁸. As such, management competence was firmly grounded in individual and behavioural terms. The popularity of these ideas spread to the UK where they were embraced by the government, initially in the Review of Vocational Qualifications⁹, then the development and implementation of the National Occupational Standards in management¹⁰ and now public service reform.

Despite the common origins of terms used in the UK and US, however, there are a number of differences in the way in which the competency concept is utilised, broadly ranging from baseline to aspirational and individual to collective. Sparrow¹¹ distinguished three main categories of approach: (1) 'management competence' indicating expected standards of workplace behaviour (e.g. the UK National Occupational Standards); (2) 'behavioural competency' for effective and superior managerial performance (e.g. as espoused by Boyatzis and colleagues); and (3) 'organisational competency' in terms of business processes leading to enhanced innovation, learning and performance; although he concludes that "organisational practice has of course muddied the distinction between the three perspectives, with competency-based systems operating using different elements of managerial

competence, behavioural competency and organisational competency thinking at different levels of the hierarchy and at different points of time”¹².

Despite this confusion the competency approach has become the most dominant model of management and leadership assessment and development in the UK¹³. In essence it attempts to identify and quantify the capacities, skills, abilities and/or qualities required of people in positions of managerial and leadership responsibility. Advocates of this approach argue that it offers a framework for effective behaviour, objectivity and consistency of approach, evidence-based assessment, a developmental framework and a means for communicating which leadership behaviours are valued and desirable within the organisation.

Recent years, however, have seen a growing body of evidence that challenges the utility of this approach. Five of the more commonly cited weaknesses include: (1) the reductionist way in which it fragments the management role rather than representing it as an integrated whole; (2) the universalistic/generic nature of competencies that underestimates the importance of context; (3) the manner in which competencies reinforce rather than challenge traditional ways of thinking about management and leadership; (4) the way in which competencies tend to focus on measurable behaviours and outcomes to the exclusion of more subtle qualities, interactions and contextual factors; and (5) the rather limited and mechanistic approach to education that often results (including the frequent conflation of assessment and development priorities).

In our own research, where we compared the contents of a range of leadership competency frameworks with accounts from practicing leaders, we noticed a number of concerning discrepancies including that: personal values and vision were absent in a third of the competency frameworks analysed; trust, ethics, inspiration, adaptability, flexibility and resilience were absent in two thirds; and personal beliefs, moral courage, humility, emotional intelligence, coping with complexity, personal reflection and work-life balance were absent in over eighty percent¹⁴. We concluded that the focus on the competencies of individuals seriously underestimates the socially constructed nature of leadership and the role played by others. Furthermore, we were concerned that excessive emphasis on measurable behaviours and outcomes comes at the expense of more subtle relational, ethical and emotional dimensions - it seems that somewhere in the process the ‘human being’ is lost: consigned to a series of bounded competency components.

The Map and the Terrain

In our analysis of findings from this study we drew an analogy to orienteering – that competencies offer only one possible map of the management and leadership landscape and should be treated as such. In application, however, there is frequently a tendency to take the representation for the reality of leading – in effect falling into the trap highlighted by Magritte in his famous painting *The Treason of Images* (1928-29) which shows an image of a pipe with the legend ‘ceci n’est pas une pipe’ (indeed, it is not - it is a representation of a pipe and serves a quite different purpose).

Whilst competencies may offer a frame for the work of leadership, like all representations they take a particular perspective, embed certain assumptions and, by attracting the readers’ eye to the main portrait, draw attention away from what lies

outside the picture. It is perhaps advisable, therefore, to step back from time to time to reflect on the space in which we are operating, to take note of what we may be missing and where we are being led. The sculptor Rachel Whiteread gives a graphic realisation of the invisible context surrounding us through constructing pieces of art by filling the empty space around everyday items (such as a light switch, staircase, room or house) with concrete or plaster and then removing the initial object. Through this inversion of the image she renders the ordinary strange and reminds us of the significance of the 'in-between' - that without space there is no form. If a similar logic were applied to the field of leadership development our gaze might be shifted beyond the content of programmes and competencies, to reflect on what may be absent, the inverse and the implications of the forms of behaviour prescribed.

Taking the RAF Leadership Attributes¹⁵, for example, to what extent does the context dictate the appropriateness of different forms of behaviour? Thus, there are clearly major differences between conflict and peacetime environments, engagement with military and non-military personnel, and interactions between people of different rank, that affect what is acceptable or not. Furthermore, as work on leadership derailers indicates it is frequently the same factors that contribute to an individuals' success that may also lead to their downfall¹⁶. Thus, for example, at what point does the attribute of 'warfighter/courageous' turn to aggression and foolhardiness? When does 'flexibility and responsiveness' give way to a chameleon-like variability? And when does a 'willingness to take risks' unnecessarily endanger the organisation and the people within it?

When considering the leadership process it is important to acknowledge the part played by everyone, both within and outside the organisation, in shaping and influencing what happens. What are the elusive qualities of leadership that defy definition or categorisation? To what extent is individual and/or collective performance constrained (or facilitated) by organisational systems and culture? There will always be something about leadership that can never be captured in a competency framework yet it is all too tempting once they have been agreed and incorporated into a model to become blind to this. In my own discussions with organisations developing frameworks or pursuing an award such as Investors in People it is the process of developing and/or seeking accreditation that brings the greatest learning in that it acts as a catalyst for discussions and enquiry into what is valued, recognised and rewarded. Once a framework has been devised or an award issued such discussions frequently cease until it is time for review or reaccreditation.

The Landscape of Leadership

So, if leadership and management competencies are only a partial representation of the wider processes of leadership how can we begin to map out a broader terrain? In recent work on leadership in Higher Education¹⁷ we identify at least five dimensions that require consideration: individual, social, structural/organisational, contextual and developmental (see Figure 1).



Figure 1 – Dimensions of leadership in HE¹⁸

The **individual** dimension (most commonly expressed through a competency approach) refers to individual leaders: their personal qualities, experience and preferences. Our research revealed a wide variation in personal styles, motivations and approaches within and between universities, ranging from highly individualistic (and sometimes idiosyncratic) through team and collective approaches to leadership. University leaders were generally represented as rather colourful characters each with his or her own personal strengths and weaknesses. Even where leadership was carried out within and across groups, someone had invariably been identified to lead or take the initiative on that activity (to chair a committee, coordinate a working group, direct a course, act as principal investigator, etc.). Despite variations, however, there was general consensus on the need for academic and professional credibility, consultation and openness, although the manner in which these translated into leadership behaviour varied considerably. Thus, whilst some depended on charisma or force of character, others constructed forums or teams for consultative and collective decision-making.

The **social** dimension concerns the social and relational aspects of organisational life. It incorporates the informal networks, partnerships and alliances; culture or ‘feel’ of the place; and any shared sense of purpose and identity. Within our own study, the concept of ‘social identity’¹⁹ seemed integrally linked to motivations and experiences of leadership that are not well captured in behavioural or procedural accounts. Identity refers to the multiple, shifting and sometimes conflicting senses of self experienced by university managers/leaders. Thus, for example, academic leaders (even up to the most senior level) retain the identity of ‘academic’ alongside their managerial role. Thus, they may endeavour to remain active in research and teaching within their own academic discipline. This dual role has the potential to generate difficult tensions such as conflicting allegiances between the institution, the discipline and even the research group; and having line management and budgetary authority whilst also needing to be seen as an academic colleague and impartial when weighing up decisions.

The **structural/organisational** dimension refers to the organisational environment in which leadership occurs. It includes organisational systems, processes and structures, particularly those relating to the allocation and management of budgets and resources, human resource management (including performance review, career progression and development), formal and informal communication channels (both vertical and horizontal) and forums for consultation and decision making. Our research in universities has demonstrated the manner in which devolution of budgetary control, along with transparency in the allocation of finances, is fundamental in shaping leadership at the school/departmental level. Formal line management and budgetary authority offer additional sources of power and authority to the post holder that may help them influence their colleagues in different ways than where they depend on informal influence alone.

The **contextual** dimension represents the broader socio-political context in which leadership occurs. Within HE, like most sectors, leadership is becoming increasingly politicised and subject to external pressures. At the heart of these changes is an increasing trend towards greater commercial and market focus that puts pressure on traditional bureaucratic and/or collegial forms of organisation. In this climate, effective leadership and management, both within and beyond the institution, are increasingly seen as an organisational necessity. Senior university leaders are more and more engaged in high-level policy debates at local, national and international level and leaders at lower levels are given greater executive powers. Universities are now regarded as central to the government's drive towards the 'knowledge economy' and subject to the modernisation agenda reforming the public sector as a whole. Within this context, there is a danger that economic efficiency becomes the overriding priority at the expense of the wider social contribution of HE.

The final dimension in Figure 1 refers to the ongoing and changing **developmental** needs of individuals, groups and organisations. Specifically within this context there is an overlap between individual, team and organisational development whereby, in order to be effective, interventions must endeavour to avoid returning changed individuals to an unchanged system or vice-versa. Thus 'leadership development' is necessarily broader than the development of people in leadership positions and organisational development addresses the human as well as non-human aspects of the system. This dimension also encompasses the temporal aspects of leadership – acknowledging that there is a time and a place for particular approaches and that personal engagement with leadership should be regarded within the wider life trajectory of the individual (both within and outside of work). Thus, for example, there are times in a person's life when taking on additional leadership responsibilities would be unadvisable and other times when it should be encouraged. Leadership is not a destination for individuals and organisations - it is an ongoing journey that requires adaptation, transformation and change.

An Integrated Approach to Leadership Development

This article calls for an integrated and holistic approach to leadership development that goes well beyond individual competencies. By way of conclusion I will present a provisional framework for embedding leadership development more deeply within the organisation (Figure 2) which has arisen from a detailed review of leadership development literature and practice²⁰.

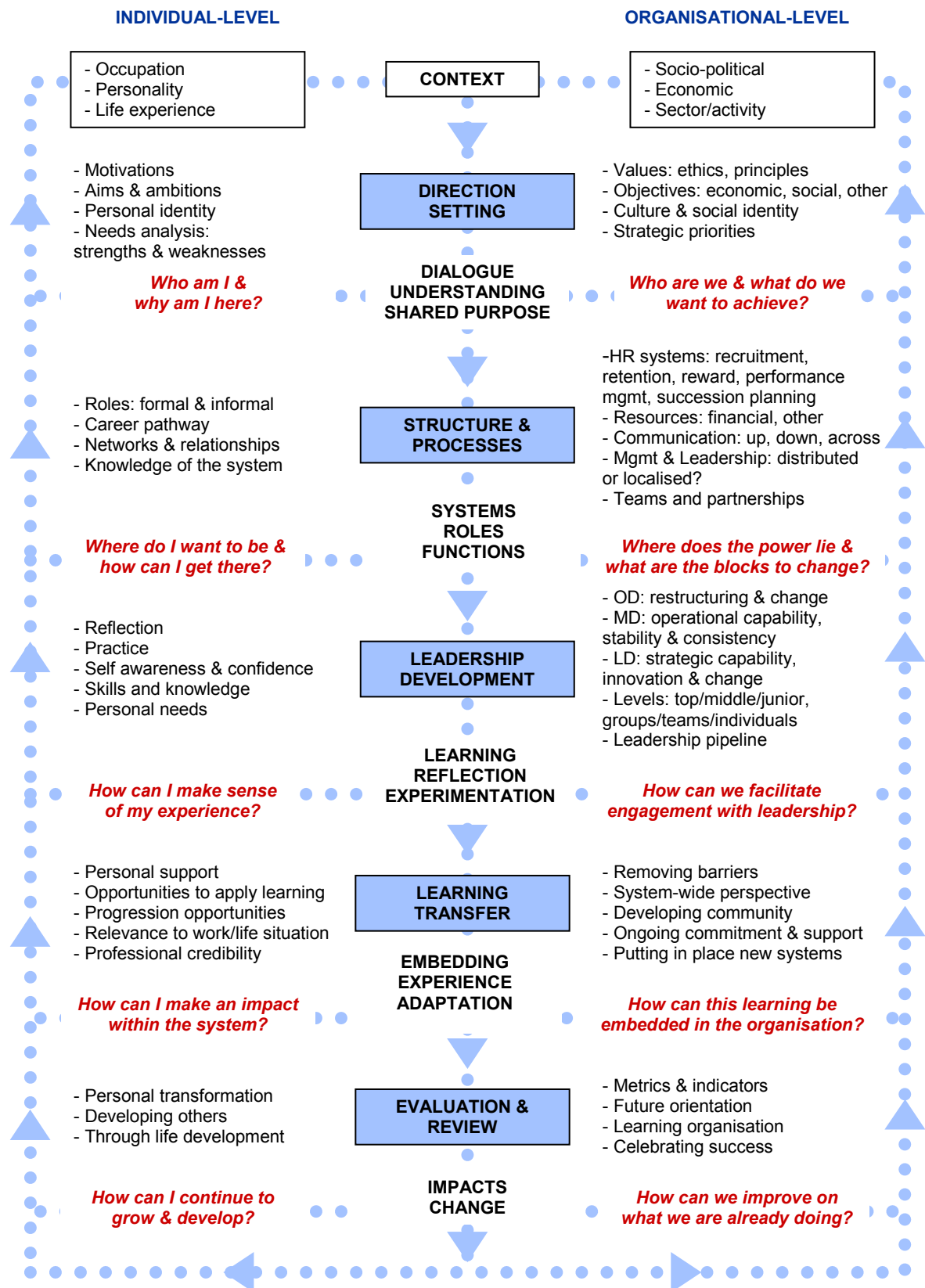


Figure 2 – Integrated Framework for Leadership Development

This diagram presents five main steps to integrated leadership development, each of which needs to be considered at the individual and organisational level, and all of which is infused and informed by the wider context. It is not static but in a continual state of flow as indicated by the dotted lines and arrows, whereby each element influences the others.

The first step, labelled **direction setting** is under-pinned by the processes of dialogue, understanding and creating shared purpose. At an individual level this involves identifying personal motivations, ambitions, identity and strengths/weaknesses. It is summed up by questions such as “who am I?” and “why am I here?” These can be deeply philosophical questions and may remain with the individual throughout the leadership development process if not their whole life. At an organisational level it involves identifying a common and connecting set of values, objectives, shared identity and strategic priorities. It is about how the organisation determines who/what it is and what it seeks to achieve. Such expressions may be captured in ethics or value statements, organisational mission and business plans and defines the ultimate purpose, and hence desirable form, of leadership within the organisation.

The second step involves examining organisational **structure & processes** and incorporates a review of systems, roles and functions. At an individual level this means focussing on formal and informal roles (both within and outside the organisation), career progression and development opportunities, networks and relationships (again within and beyond the organisation), and an in-depth and practical understanding of how the system works. Such a perspective should help reveal any barriers, conflicts and sources of support for taking-on/developing a leadership role. At the organisational level it involves reviewing how human resource (HR) practices, resource allocation, communication processes, management and leadership approaches, and partnership working influences the distribution of power and resistance to change within the system.

The third step, **leadership development**, relates to the actual process of enhancing leadership capability of individuals and the wider organisation. For individuals this involves offering opportunities for learning, reflection and experimentation that builds on and extends prior experience. Whilst an element of this may be about straight skills and knowledge acquisition, it must also go deeper so as to engage with the bigger questions and issues raised in steps one and two. At the organisational level this requires the integration of organisational development (OD), management development (MD) and leadership development (LD). It may occur at a number of levels, through multiple channels, be associated with organisational change, and involve longer-term planning for staff development and succession. Ultimately the question here is “how can we facilitate an active engagement with leadership?”

The fourth step is about **learning transfer**. Without application to, and implementation in, the work and life context of individuals and organisations leadership development will fail to bear fruit. Thus individual leaders will require ongoing support, opportunities to apply their learning, and the ability to be recognised as credible in front of their peers and colleagues. They need to take stock of their situation and discover how they can influence the system from their position within it.

For organisations, the transfer involves embedding the learning within organisational systems and processes, eliminating barriers, developing a sense of community and the establishment of new systems and processes where required. Fundamentally, to be effective leadership development requires long-term top-level support and investment and an ongoing commitment to supporting and developing participants.

Finally, the leadership development process requires **evaluation & review**. Without personal transformation, sharing the learning with others and a commitment to life-long learning individuals will not maximise on the value of their development. Likewise, at the organisational level there should be attempts to identify success, future needs and requirements and meaningful measures and indicators of impact and performance.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, in this article I have argued that leadership development involves more than just developing leaders. It is an important forum for exploring values, identity and purpose and can offer an initiating framework for collective sense making and action. Furthermore, I would propose that collective capability (in terms of focus, drive and ability) emerges from a shared sense of purpose and identity and that leadership and followership go hand in hand. I would even go as far as arguing that there are many times when the leader-follower distinction confuses the issue, placing too much emphasis on who performs which role, rather than the underlying leadership process as a whole.

A glimpse of a broader systems perspective on leadership is given in a quote from ex-US president Bill Clinton at a World AIDS Conference in 2006. When asked to reflect on what he had learnt about leadership through his involvement with HIV/AIDS projects in Southern Africa he spoke of a young HIV-positive woman working at community-level in Lesotho who, despite no formal authority, was taking an active leadership role in encouraging others to check their HIV status. From this, he concluded that *“leadership is more a state of mind than a place in a hierarchy”*. In saying this he implied that leadership is more about a way of being than who or what you are – it requires a sense of connection to those who you wish to lead and a desire to bring about positive change for the benefit of the wider community. Without doubt the trappings of power, charisma and authority open up certain opportunities (and expectations) for leadership but the vast majority of leadership work is carried-out by ordinary people in their everyday interactions with one another and the social, cultural and organisational context in which they find themselves.

Throughout this article I have argued that effective and inspiring leadership engages with broader social processes that play at least as significant a role in leadership as the actions of the individual leader. Despite this, many of these influences remain largely hidden or obscured and are all too often neglected within organisations. At the very least leader, leadership and organisational development are part of the same process and ultimately bound to the moral and ethical values and beliefs of organisational members. The implications of this are both incredibly simple and complex: simple in that there is no magical panacea that we need to find (the answers are already there) and complex in that achieving this fine balance remains a lifetime’s work.

Notes

- ¹ From [www.quotationspage.com/ quotes/Antoine_de_Saint-Exupery]
- ² E.g. Bass, B.M. and Avolio, B.J. (1994) *Improving Organizational Effectiveness Through Transformational Leadership*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications.
- ³ See also the paper by Jonathan Gosling in this edition.
- ⁴ Uhl-Bien, M. (2006) Relational leadership theory: exploring the social processes of leadership and organizing, *Leadership Quarterly*, 17, 654-676 – quote on p.668.
- ⁵ Spillane, J.P. (2006) *Distributed Leadership*. San-Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- ⁶ Sandberg, J. (2000) Understanding human competence at work: an interpretative approach, *Academy of Management Journal*, 43 (1), 9–25.
- ⁷ Day, D. (2001) Leadership development: a review in context, *Leadership Quarterly*, 11(4), 581-613.
- ⁸ Boyatzis, R.E. (1982) *The Competent Manager: a model for effective performance*. New York: Wiley – quote on p.21.
- ⁹ De Ville, O. (1986) *The Review of Vocational Qualifications in England and Wales*. MSC/DES, London, HMSO.
- ¹⁰ MCI (1997) *National Occupational Standards in Management*. London: Management Charter Initiative. URL: [www.management-standards.org.uk].
- ¹¹ Sparrow, P. (1997) ‘Organisational competencies: creating a strategic behavioural framework for selection and assessment’ in N. Anderson and P. Herriot (Eds) *International Handbook of Selection and Assessment*. Chichester: John Wiley.
- ¹² Sparrow, P. (2002) ‘To use competencies or not to use competencies? That is the question’, in M. Pearn (ed.) *Individual Differences and Development in Organizations*, Chichester: John Wiley, 107-129 – quote on p.112.
- ¹³ Miller, L., Rankin, N. and Neathey, F. (2001) *Competency Frameworks in UK Organizations*. London: CIPD.
- ¹⁴ Bolden, R. and Gosling, J. (2006) Leadership competencies: time to change the tune, *Leadership*, 2(2), 147-163.
- ¹⁵ RAF Leadership Centre (2006) *RAF Leadership Attributes*. URL: [www.raf.mod.uk/RAFLeadershipcentre/theleader/attributes.cfm], accessed 09/07/07
- ¹⁶ E.g. Dotlich, D. and Cairo, P. (2003) *Why CEOs Fail*, San Fransisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- ¹⁷ Bolden, R., Petrov, G. and Gosling, J. (2007) *Developing Collective Leadership in Higher Education*. Final Report for the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, May.
- ¹⁸ Please note that whilst this model may appear static it is intended to be dynamic, with each domain strongly influencing the others and adapting and changing over time.
- ¹⁹ Haslam, S.A. (2004) *Psychology in Organizations: The Social Identity Approach 2nd Edition*. London: Sage Publications.
- ²⁰ Bolden, R. (ed.) (2006) *Leadership Development in Context*. Leadership South West Research Report, Centre for Leadership Studies, August. URL: [www.leadership-studies.com/lsw/lswreports.htm].