DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP[1]

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The concept of 'distributed leadership' has become popular in recent years as an alternative to models of leadership that concern themselves primarily with the attributes and behaviours of individual 'leaders' (e.g. trait, situational , style and transformational theories). This approach argues for a more systemic perspective, whereby leadership responsibility is dissociated from formal organisational roles, and the action and influence of people at all levels is recognised as integral to the overall direction and functioning of the organisation. Spillane (2006) suggests that a distributed perspective 'puts leadership practice centre stage' (p. 25) thereby encouraging a shift in focus from the traits and characteristics of 'leaders' to the shared activities and functions of 'leadership'.

The call for a more collectively-embedded notion of leadership has arisen from research, theory and practice that highlights the limitations of the traditional 'leader-follower' dualism that places the responsibility for leadership firmly in the hands of the 'leader' and represents the 'follower' as somewhat passive and subservient. Instead, it is argued that: 'leadership is probably best conceived as a group quality, as a set of functions which must be carried out by the group' (Gibb, 1954, cited in Gronn 2000: 324). As such, this approach demands a dramatic reconsideration of the distribution of power and influence within organisations. It isn't simply about creating more 'leaders' (a numerical/additive function) but

facilitating 'concertive action' and pluralistic engagement (Gronn, 2000; 2002). In effect, distributed leadership is far more than the sum of its parts.

That said, distributed leadership does not deny the key role played by people in formal leadership positions, but proposes that this is only the tip of the iceberg. Spillane et al. (2004: 5) argue that leadership is 'stretched over the social and situational contexts' of the organisation and extend the notion to include material and cultural artefacts (language, organisational systems, physical environment, etc.). The situated nature of leadership is viewed as 'constitutive of leadership practice' (ibid, p.20-21) and hence demands recognition of leadership acts within their wider context.

Such a perspective draws heavily on systems and process theory and locates leadership clearly beyond the individual leader and within the relationships and interactions of multiple actors and the situations in which they find themselves. A useful analogy is given by Wilfred Drath in his book *The Deep Blue Sea* (2002) where he urges us look beyond the wave crests (formal 'leaders') to the deep blue sea from whence they come (the latent leadership potential within the organisation).

In a review of the literature Bennet *et al.* (2003) suggest that, despite some variations in definition, distributed leadership is based on three main premises:

firstly that leadership is an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals; secondly that there is openness to the boundaries of leadership (i.e. who has a part to play both within and beyond the organisation); and thirdly, that varieties of expertise are distributed across the many, not the few. Thus, distributed leadership is represented as dynamic, relational, inclusive, collaborative and contextually-situated. It requires a system-wide perspective that not only transcends organisational levels and roles but also organisational boundaries. Thus, for example, in the field of education, where distributed leadership is being actively promoted, one might consider the contribution of parents, students and the local community as well as teachers and governors in school leadership.

> 'Taking this view, leadership is about learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. It involves opportunities to surface and mediate perceptions, values, beliefs, information and assumptions through continuing conversations. It means generating ideas together; seeking to reflect upon and make sense of work in the light of shared beliefs and new information; and creating actions that grow out of these new understandings. It implies that leadership is socially constructed and culturally sensitive. It does not imply a leader/follower divide, neither does it point towards the leadership potential of just one person.'

> (Harris, 2003: 314)

In addition to extending the boundaries of leadership the above quote indicates the centrality of dialogue and the construction of shared meaning within social groups. As such, the concept has much in common with notions of democratic and inclusive leadership (Woods, 2004).

Of the authors who have attempted to develop a conceptual model of distributed leadership Gronn (2000, 2002) and Spillane et al. (2004) are perhaps the most comprehensive. In each case, they have used Activity Theory (Engestrom, 1999) as a theoretical tool to frame the idea of distributed leadership practice, using it as a bridge between agency and structure (in Gronn's case) and distributed cognition and action (in Spillane et al's case). Leadership, therefore, is seen an integral part of the daily activities and interactions of everyone across the enterprise, irrespective of position. It is revealed equally within small, incremental, informal and emergent acts as within large-scale transformational change from the top. The more members across the organization exercise their influence, the greater the leadership distribution. This is not a zero sum equation where developing the agency of followers diminishes the power of formal leaders but one where each can mutually reinforce the other.

In practice, there are many forms that distributed leadership can take and the literature does not generally prescribe one over the other. Within schools, for

example, MacBeath (2005) identifies six forms of distributed leadership (formal, pragmatic, strategic, incremental, opportunistic and cultural) but argues that the most appropriate and effective form will depend upon the situation. There are, however, some serious challenges to the practical implementation of distributed leadership. MacBeath (ibid) argues that distributed leadership is premised on trust, implies a mutual acceptance of one another's leadership potential, requires formal leaders to 'let go' some of their control and authority, and favours consultation and consensus over command and control. Each of these poses a serious challenge to traditional hierarchical models of authority and control in organisations and can place severe physical and psychological demands on designated managers.

There are also serious implications for leadership development. Whilst the majority of investment continues to be for individuals in formal leadership roles, a distributed perspective would argue for the development of leadership capacity throughout the organisation. This distinction is captured by Day (2001) in his comparison between 'leader' and 'leadership development'. Whereas 'leader development' is an investment in *human capital* to enhance intrapersonal competence for selected individuals, 'leadership development' is an investment in *social capital* to develop interpersonal networks and cooperation within organisations and other social systems. In his account both of these are necessary but the latter is all too often neglected.

By considering leadership practice as both thinking and activity that 'emerges in the execution of leadership tasks in and through the interaction of leaders, followers and situation' (Spillane et al., 2004: 27) distributed leadership offers a powerful post-heroic representation of leadership well suited to complex, changing and inter-dependent environments. The challenge will be whether or not organisations and the holders of power will be sufficiently flexible to enable this to occur in practice.

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Biography

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