

The Leaders We Deserve? : Leadership and Community Relations

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There is something within the culture of community relations work that shies away from the idea of individual leadership. It may be that the egalitarian spirit of community activism does not allow for the elevation of individuals, that the communalist ethos insists on power being distributed democratically, rather than entrusted to individuals at the top. Certainly, a glance through the annual reports, newsletters and journals of the key agencies would seem to support this interpretation: the focus is always on the group, the committee or the campaign, and when the spotlight falls on the individual it is rarely on the leader. Annual reports and publicity materials usually put the focus on those people whose story seems to best illustrate the nature of the enterprise: the children benefiting from a cross-community scheme, the woman who has launched a new neighbourhood scheme, or the pensioners who have come together for a people's history project.

This makes the community relations sector quite unlike every other part of society. Leadership and management have always been strong themes in business and industry, but increasingly public sector agencies are being re-configured in ways that make the role of the manager more like the CEO of an American business corporation. The answer to failing schools in Britain, for example, has been a search for 'visionary' head-teachers and large budgets are committed to training academies to develop leadership potential for those running schools, hospitals and other public services. So strong is this emphasis on leadership that it is assumed that anyone who is a 'leader' will possess enough generic skills to be able to take command of any public enterprise: schools do not have to be run by teachers, hospitals by doctors, or universities by academics. Leadership has come to be seen as the panacea for all problems, and the model of leadership derives mainly from business – even if it comes in the open-shirted variety personified by Richard Branson.

The exception then is community relations. Or is it? Might it be the case that attitudes to leadership simply manifest themselves in other ways? There is a real difference between the written, or official, discourse about community relations and the way in which workers and activists talk about it in unofficial or informal settings, such as in the bar, or in the coffee breaks at a conference. On these occasions the work of particular organisations is often described and interpreted through the personality of the director, and the successes or shortcomings of the particular organisation are attributed to that particular individual, as if these were somehow manifestations of their personality. It is a fascinating disconnect: at one level, the public or official one, discussion of leadership is absent; at the private, or unofficial one, it is assumed to be crucial. One reason why this might be the case is that the field of community relations does want leadership to be of a different sort, but lacks the models, or indeed the vocabulary to develop this.

To test this possibility, I worked with some colleagues from the School of Education at Queen's to survey the field. What follows here is a summary of the report we produced, *Leadership and Community Relations in Northern Ireland* (Nolan, McCabe, McCotter, London and McManus, 2009).

Design of the survey

We took a wide definition of the field of practice, not limiting it to those organizations with 'community relations' in the title, or even in their mission statements, but including all those – voluntary, community, and statutory – whose activities require an orientation towards community relations practice. From this we derived a survey sample made up of the following five bodies: one organization which has its prime purpose the promotion of peace and reconciliation; one district council, the PSNI, GAA and the Orange Order. We decided not just to look at those in leadership positions, as this survey was also about 'followership' – the ways in which leadership is granted from below. The methodology we selected was one which took as its coordinates multiple positions within each organisation: someone in a senior management or leadership role and then the opinions of those much further down the ranks. This meant using in-depth interviews for the individual managers and focus group discussions for the more rank-and-file members: the intention in each case was to see the degree of congruence between the two in their views of what constitutes appropriate leadership for their particular organisation.

In order to provide a frame of reference to allow the discussion to begin we developed our own typology of leadership styles. Once these were in place we then used them to broaden the scope of the study through a written questionnaire. This was first of all circulated on our behalf by the Community Relations Council to over 100 organisations drawn from its regular mailing list, with an accompanying letter explaining the nature and purpose of the research. Responses were slow to arrive and so additional copies were sent to agencies like the WEA, the Ulster People's College and the two Belfast interface projects. A total of 23 forms were returned.

The questionnaire survey and the case studies therefore are not part of the same sample; rather we have used different methods to reach different audiences to ensure as broad a sweep as possible in a study of this size. Confidentiality was assured as far as possible: while the names of the individuals that follow are pseudonyms, and the Harmony Reconciliation Centre and the Ballyduff District Council are also pseudonyms, common sense required that the PSNI and the GAA would have to be reported under their own names.

The typology: six types of leader

A useful way to translate theoretical models of leadership into tools that people can use is to create a typology - that is, a classification of various styles or methods. Belbin's (1981) team roles, for example, are frequently used on management training programmes to help participants reflect on their leadership style. To create this typology, Meredith Belbin developed three clusters, each one further divided into three, as follows:

Action-oriented roles	People-oriented roles	Cerebral roles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shaper • Implementer • Completer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-ordinator • Teamworker • Resource investigator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor • Evaluator • Specialist

Other writers do it differently. Daniel Goleman, for example, in his ground-breaking 2000 article *Leadership that gets results* suggests six leadership styles: coercive, authoritative, affiliative, democratic, coaching and pace-setting. Esther Cameron and Mike Green (2008) suggest the following five leadership types:

- The edgy catalyst
- The visionary motivator
- The measured contractor
- The tenacious implementer
- The thoughtful architect

All of these different typologies have merit, but in the main they have been designed for the business world and are intended to be as generic as possible across a range of different contexts. In preparing our typology we wanted to make it as relevant as possible to the practice of community relations in Northern Ireland. Following discussions with the field we came up with the following six leadership types:

The Mobiliser

The Mobiliser is able to inspire and motivate others with their charisma and the visionary nature of their thinking. Their vision is not limited to potential opportunities but also includes potential dangers and threats. They are able to paint an appealing vision of the future and can serve as inspirational focal points for an organisation. Often, they are able to tap into deep-seated fears and hopes of others to develop followers who are so attached to the vision that they are willing to take risks, risks that the Mobiliser also appears willing to take.

The Builder

The Builder is willing and able to step out on a limb to create something new; in some cases, this may involve taking the ideas of the Mobiliser and turning them into actual organisations or structures. They are able to consolidate the ideas of others and are willing to start and persevere in the face of great uncertainty and ambiguity. The Builder is the person who can turn an idea into a structure, and ensure that the idea is developed in ways that ensure its success. Builders make the organisation itself the prime focus of their concern, and they command respect because they have the power and the drive to expand its influence even in a competitive market.

The Adapter

From time to time organisations have to change their fundamental assumptions and their everyday practices; this requires the sort of re-visioning that does not suit either the Builder or the Maintainer. The Adapter is someone who has the entrepreneurial skills to see where the market is moving, along with the ability to persuade others to jettison long-held beliefs and customs (possibly values) in order that the organisation can change with the times.

The Maintainer

The Maintainer ensures that rules and expectations, both formal and informal, are created and maintained so that everyone has a sense of what can be expected at all times and in all situations. The goal of the Maintainer is to ensure that day-to-day operations are working and that the organisation is in compliance with any legalities or policies impacting the organisation. The Maintainer ensures that an organisation's mission is fulfilled and its structure is sustained and easily understandable.

The Spoiler

The Spoiler has the ability to convince others that attempted changes to the organisation (frequently from "above") are mistakes and should not be implemented. The Spoiler will often present themselves as an upholder of the original vision of the organisation, presenting proposed changes as contradictory with the "true" mission of the organisation. Spoilers may not hold official positions, and indeed their authority may derive from being seen as the 'real' voice of the members.

The Moral Compass

Peace-building tends to generate leaders completely different from those seen in the business world – these are people who inspire by presenting a moral passion or commitment to an ideal. The Moral Compass ensures that there is a strong connection between the values of an organisation and its actions. They frequently inspire others by being morally passionate, demonstrating a real commitment to core ideals of the organisation. While such figures can seem inspirational to some, to others they can appear naïve or irksome because they present a challenge to accepted organisational, as well as individual, behaviours and structures.

Findings

The questionnaire responses showed the Maintainer to be the most common form of leader, followed closely by the Builder and then, in descending order, the Adapter, the Mobiliser, the Moral Compass and, least frequent of all, the Spoiler. The relatively low position given to the Mobiliser (fourth place) may be explained by the additional comments on the survey forms which showed a strong consensus in support of the view that funding bodies are now crucial in directing policy in community relations work. If this is the case, then it is understandable that the visionary leader is of less relevance than the Builder and the Maintainer, who may not inspire with new visions, but whose skills are attuned to the practicalities of keeping organizations alive in a volatile and threatening environment. At the other end of the spectrum, both the Moral Compass and the Spoiler were thought to be the least common types. There are two ways to interpret this. The positive interpretation would be that community relations bodies have sufficient consensus among their stakeholders regarding their mission and core values so as not to require the Moral Compass to guide them back to these central tenets. The other, more worrying, interpretation would be that this lack of Moral Compass leadership can potentially cause major issues for organizations as they enter into what some respondents describe as a period of relative instability in the political and social arenas allowing organizations to drift away from fundamental beliefs and missions.

These were issues we were able to explore in more depth in the one-to-one interviews and focus groups we used in the case studies. The typology we had produced proved to be a useful trigger for discussion and reinforced the sense that those working in the field want to see *all* of the leadership types in play. With multiple references to changing needs of the community, policy shifts, and inevitable organisational changes, an effective organisation will need to tap into several different types of leadership to stay effective. This variety of leadership does not need to come from a single person, but it does need to be available within the organisation. For example, to meet changing needs, a community relations group will need an Adapter to recognise the shift in needs, someone to be a Mobiliser as they move forward, and also a Moral Compass to make sure they are staying true to their core values. The second big theme drawn from the responses, closely tied in with the previous issue of developing multiple types of leadership, referred to a lack of stability in the surrounding environment that organisations need to be aware of and responsive to if they want to be successful. Changes in policy (and the political environment), the current economic recession, requirements of funders, cultural and social changes, and shifts within the organisation that naturally

happen to groups over time necessitate an organisation that is flexible and dynamic, able to respond to changes quickly and effectively.

The focus on pragmatic skills, rather than on vision, may reflect a conceptual distinction that can be made between management and leadership, but it also reflects a difference between the culture of community relations today and the inspirational spirit that helped to bring some of the main organizations into being a generation ago. This can create a sense that the last generation was visionary and the baton has now passed to a commissar class who do not possess the same inspirational gifts, and who are content to administer the affairs of the organisations in the ways that funders require. It would be useful to test this caricature version of history by referring back to previous studies, but there is no previous research that can provide reference points. We do know however that the community relations field is not alone in experiencing this inheritance problem: one only has to think of the political parties in Northern Ireland to be reminded that, cometh the hour, cometh the men and the women. The DUP, the Alliance Party, the SDLP and Provisional Sinn Fein all sprang into being within one short period between January 1970 and October 1971, and following that volcanic period the political lava set and hardened in such a way that the political landscape has changed very little over the course of a couple of generations. Similarly, the pressures of the early Troubles threw up a number of voluntary and community-based organisations, and the leadership responsible for their creation may now enjoy the legendary status of the early pioneers, while those who follow after them are destined to appear less visionary.

Such a judgment would be unfair. The changing nature of leadership is not to do with the innate characteristics of leaders (or the lack of these characteristics) so much as it is to do with the changes in the organisational environment, the organisation itself, and the scale and complexity of the human, physical and financial resources it commands. Thus, to say that someone is task-oriented while someone else is people-oriented may not be an accurate characterisation of personality traits, but simply a reflection of the pressures or the freedoms experienced at particular times. In some ways the art of management consists precisely of adjusting to circumstances, and even to anticipating them so that attention can be focused on internal or external tasks, people or structures, delegated authority or centralised control as the situation demands. And certainly that is the leitmotif of the responses we received: people want managers and leaders to be many different things. That may reflect the confusion that is inevitable when people begin a discussion where there is still not even a shared vocabulary, or it may reflect a much more sophisticated understanding that leadership must be conceptualised in ways

that go far beyond neo-charismatic theories. Before we unpack the findings any further though it might be worth pointing out a few things that did *not* emerge in our study.

Firstly, there is no evidence that the fault line that runs through almost every other part of life in Northern Ireland can be detected in leadership styles: there is simply not a Protestant or a Catholic DNA that can be detected in management or leadership styles. In fact, in the case studies the Orange Order and the GAA show a similar commitment to devolved authority, a similar tension between the centre and the periphery, and a similar conditionality in the acceptance of individual leadership – in both cases it is granted only when individuals are seen to embody core values, and is withheld when it is not. The other factor which was not reflected in our survey is gender. This is somewhat surprising: a distinct trend in recent management theory is to focus on women's management style, and it might be expected that certain traits, such as having a people focus or nurturing or caring for staff would be characterised as female, while other, more forceful styles would be seen as masculine. And in fact the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland is highly gendered: according to the annual review published by NICVA, *The State of the Sector*, 8 out of 10 paid employees in the health and social care area are female, and gender is a factor in almost all specialist forms of activity. For example, men outnumber women by two to one amongst volunteers in environmental organisations, and similar imbalances can be found elsewhere. Perhaps more significantly, women tend to outnumber men in voluntary organisations that deal with Troubles-related activities where caring is involved, like counselling or reconciliation work, while men often take on leadership roles in the rougher areas like interface work or exchanges involving ex-combatants. As the Equality Commission does not collect data on the employment practices of organisations that employ less than 250 people, it is impossible to go beyond the impressionistic and anecdotal about gender patterns in smaller community relations bodies, but it is a safe bet that gender might be one of the more interesting determinants in leadership and management style. Distinctions would of course have to be made between the leadership style adopted by women in male-dominated organisations and the more innovative practices in women-only organisations, but interesting as it may be, considerations of that kind did not spontaneously occur in the surveys we conducted.

Conclusions

From the research we conducted a number of clear conclusions can be drawn. There are six in all:

1) The community relations field has denied itself the opportunity to develop its own distinctive leadership styles or to innovate properly because of a self-denying silence on the subject. There is a distinctive value system that is people-centred, egalitarian and informal but these values cannot be said to have manifested themselves in ways that can be easily identified and discussed. The conceptualisation of management still lags behind the practice, and delays its development.

2) Leadership is still very often thought of in terms of being the special quality of charismatic individuals - or Mobilisers - and the ground-breaking work of early pioneers can be experienced and internalised as a silent rebuke to the managers of today who, by necessity, have to work much more often as Maintainers, focused on legal, regulatory and financial matters. When asked to name leaders, respondents often tended to cite 'distant' leaders (figures from history, the media and celebrities) rather than 'near' leaders (people they actually know and work with).

3) Leadership is in fact much more varied and layered than this, and when asked what they wanted from their leaders respondents tended to value those things that bring them immediate rewards and freedoms in their everyday jobs rather than lofty and aspirational ideas. The support of your immediate manager to undertake a course or be given responsibility for a project are expressions of the sort of facilitative leadership that people in the field want, and we found evidence that this type of support was actually forthcoming in different organisations - most notably in the Ballyduff District Council where the commitment to a shared vision meant that staff were not looking for direction, but focusing rather on systems of reciprocal support in their work. This reinforces the point made in the earlier section on management theory that leadership is ordinary and everyday and occurs at many different layers and grades.

4) Community relations is not unique in requiring multiple management styles that vary according to external circumstances. Responses to our questionnaire showed that no one management style will serve the changing environments that have resulted from the extraordinary circumstances of the peace process, and while a focus on internal organisation and the self-fulfilment of staff may be appropriate at stable periods, the focus must shift to an emphasis on

opportunities in the external environment in periods such as the one we are about to enter when major funding will be withdrawn. The Builder must at times become the Maintainer; if there are radical changes in the funding available then the new situation will require more entrepreneurial activity, more political lobbying and more coalition-building – the set of skills more associated with the Adapter. At another time, when the organisation seems to be losing its way, the Moral Compass may have to re-assert the core values that brought the organisation into being in the first place.

5) Leadership training is underdeveloped and under-resourced primarily for the reasons given above: it will not be given proper resources until its absence is recognised as a problem. The questionnaire shows that, unlike other sectors, time constraints are not the problem: the main issue seems to be that opportunities are not provided. When asked about the types of training that would be thought relevant, two quite contrasting options were favoured. The most popular choice was for training delivered by outsiders, the second was for mentoring which is usually an internal process. It would seem that both have to be tried in practice and then evaluated – along with other training methods – before the efficacy of different approaches can be judged.

6) Perhaps the strongest message to come out of our survey was that strategic direction for peacebuilding activity has become the property of funding bodies, and that directors and management committees of bodies concerned with community relations have no choice but to work within a compliance culture, and function mainly in Maintainer or Adapter modes. Such a strong top down approach has produced a sense across the sector that the space for visionary leadership is very constrained. Against that, the records of the Peace Programmes show a dizzying variety of bottom-up activity: in Peace 1 there was a total of community 15,016 projects, and a similar amount during the Peace 2 period. Imagination and leadership are clearly not in short supply, but there does appear to be a disconnect between the leadership given by governmental and intergovernmental bodies on the one hand and on the other, leadership at local level.

Finally, how do those involved in community relations work move towards a more purposeful engagement with the broad issue of leadership? The first step, we feel, is to get it on the agenda of the major agencies, and to use the skills within the sector to facilitate discussion on how a distinctive leadership style can be conceptualised and then nurtured within organisations. Our hope in producing this report is that it will act as a stimulus to such a discussion.

References

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