Mobilizing Public Service Leaders as Change Agents through Leadership Development Initiatives in England: Problems and Prospects

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Summary

Qualitative research on public service-wide investment in the development of service organization leaders to build improvement capacity in England showed the initiative to be problematic. Central government ministers attempted, in part, to mobilize senior service organization staff as change agents spearheading the implementation of government-driven public service reforms. The investment comprised national leadership development bodies (NLDBs) for different fully and part-public funded sectors. NLDB provision was largely siloized within each service sector, since sensitivity to contingent sectoral characteristics was widely deemed necessary for credibility with participants. Ironically, the mobilization effort appeared to be a victim of its own success. It was moderately mediated across administrative levels through the exercise of leadership. Identification with being a leader legitimated senior staff in NLDBs and service organizations acting in accordance with their professional cultures, which only partially aligned with the political values underlying reforms. Senior NLDB staff promoted leadership as generic rather than directly linked to reform. Service organization leaders further mediated this thrust by adapting reforms and pursuing independent change agendas. A recent change of government, since the research was conducted, suggests that this investment will largely continue. Although a relatively weak approach for promoting the faithful implementation of reforms, the prospects seem better for promoting continuous service improvement. It appears unlikely that a voluntary mechanism set-up to foster exchange and coordination between NLDBs will significantly reduce the siloization of provision.
Mobilizing Public Service Leaders as Change Agents through Leadership Development Initiatives in England: Problems and Prospects

Mobilizing Service Organization Senior Staff as Leaders of Reform?

This paper reports on qualitative research showing how the mobilization of leadership development provision in England during the tenure of the superseded New Labour government, in part a means of mobilizing senior staff in different fully and part-public funded sectors as conduits for government-driven reform, was moderately mediated across administrative levels through the exercise of leadership. The choice of leadership as a vehicle for mobilizing reform appeared, ironically, to foster an enhanced sense of personal agency as leaders amongst senior staff in public service organizations. It legitimated both their moderate mediation of reforms and the pursuit of alternative change agendas. Developing leadership appears to be a problematic policy lever for promoting the faithful implementation of policy agendas—particularly salient for policymakers, given the international expansion of leadership development provision in the public services and elsewhere.

The research scrutinized public service leadership development provision in England and its impact on the perceptions of organization leaders about their role and allegiances to government and other stakeholders in relation to change. The study was funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council and conducted by a team from the Universities of Cardiff and Bristol. The focus reflected international interest in developing the managerial and leadership capacity of senior staff in organizations (Day 2001), including the public services (Bush 2008; Pont et al 2008; Hartley and Hinksman 2003). Over the last two decades the dominant metaphor framing coordination activity by senior staff has shifted from management to leadership (Hoyle and Wallace 2007). Burns’ (1978) treatise on ‘transformative’ political leadership, promoting the moral imperative of radical collective improvement, stimulated a revolution in discourse and practice (Wallace and Tomlinson 2010). The complementary ‘cultural turn’ in management theory advocated leaders forging a ‘strong’ unified culture to achieve collective goals (Schein 1985). ‘Transformational’ leadership helped to frame UK New Labour government public policy in general, and leadership development interventions within England in particular (OPSR 2002; Newman 2005). It implies significant individual agency, or choice amongst alternative courses of action (Giddens 1984), to forge a shared vision for a better future whilst fostering synergistic organization-wide efforts to achieve it. Increasing acknowledgement that the legitimate influencing of others is not the sole prerogative of ‘top’ formal leaders resulted in notions of ‘distributed’ leadership (Gronn 2000, 2002; Bolden et al 2009) being widely adopted as a complementary frame. The distribution of leadership embraces both the formal influencing activity of members occupying a hierarchy of managerial roles and the more emergent and informal activity of any member, as in team situations.

Since the 1980s leadership has been widely associated with change for improvement, management being relegated mainly to maintenance activity (e.g. Louis and Miles 1990). Implicitly, leadership is integral to ‘change agency’ (Caldwell 2003): proactively initiating and implementing change. Originally conceived as consultancy (Lewin 1947), change agency embodies a relationship with the ‘agent’ acting instrumentally on behalf of others. The research sought to find out how far senior staff in English public service organizations perceived themselves as leaders who were change agents, and on whose behalf. The research team was especially interested in examining how far the burgeoning provision of national leadership development programmes for senior staff in public service organizations was designed to shape their self-perceptions as leaders embodying change agency - whether for reform or locally derived change agendas - and to what effect. Such provision is ‘external’ to target organizations insofar as the planned sequence of activities designed to support learning is offered by specialist providers who are not based in participants’ institution. As a strategic intervention, external leadership development contrasts with formal internal leadership development activity, such as job rotation or teambuilding. It is also very different from the informal and often incidental processes of natural learning in the job (Wallace 1999; Burgoyne et al 2004) through which all staff in managerial positions develop their capability.

UK government sponsorship of external leadership development provision coincided with the increasingly prevalent view amongst policymakers that managerial roles incorporate responsibility for implementing service ‘modernization’ reforms. The latter reflected the ideological shift towards New Managerialism
(Clarke and Newman 1997) with its policy technology of New Public Management (Hood 1991), later extended by policies fostering greater citizen-consumerism (Clarke et al 2007) and inter-professional participation through ‘new public governance’ (Osborne 2010). Reforms to increase external accountability and quasi-marketization regimes (Ferlie et al 1996) had radically curbed the long-established individual autonomy of service providers as professionals (Freidson 2001). Traditional hallmarks of a profession, variably evidenced in different public services, include: specialized knowledge developed through lengthy education and training and applied selectively in diverse settings; the maintenance of membership boundaries; and extensive individual autonomy delimited by self-regulation according to a client-centred ethical code (Hoyle and Wallace 2005). Some senior service organization staff, however, were increasingly being part-reprofessionalized as leaders through credentialized leadership development. Initiates were accorded certain professional characteristics as a cadre of leaders. They were being offered leadership knowledge through elite training opportunities, some linked to formal or informal credentials which effectively create a boundary around the ‘initiated’. They were also encouraged to express autonomy through exercising their legitimate agency as leaders, within externally framed parameters. During the period covered by our research, public service reforms moved beyond what NPM can achieve through individual organizational control towards a post-NPM milieu (Ferlie et al 2003), promoting decentralized collaborative service networks (Newman 2001; Newman and Clarke 2009). Such networks were to be developed through leadership and management underpinned by a citizen-oriented ‘new professionalism’ (Cabinet Office 2008, 2009a), fostering local improvement.

Leadership development provided by specialists outside participants’ organizations can offer a potential means of harnessing service leaders as change agents who spearhead the implementation of government-driven reform. Equally, it may be directed towards encouraging leaders to set a local, more autonomous direction for service improvement, while also responding to independent agendas for change. Documentary evidence indicates that the UK New Labour government did indeed attempt to employ external leadership development for fostering public service leadership as a conduit for the implementation of its reforms (O’Reilly et al 2007). New Labour was a particularly heavy leadership development investor (PIU 2001), incrementally creating a strongly centralized arrangement within each English service sector of a unique national leadership development body (NLDB) for that sector. Some NLDBs overlaid and even ignored previous initiatives to develop management capacity (Bolam 2004). Others were newly established. NLDBs variably harnessed, as course commissioners or providers, the much longer tradition of professional development through away-from-the-workplace training (Eraut 1994). Altogether, eleven English service sector-specific NLDBs were created or reconfigured in the first decade after the accession of the Labour Party to government in 1997 (Table 1 overleaf).

Those for largely public-funded services (albeit with growing private sector involvement) include the National College for School Leadership (NCSL - renamed, since our study, the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services) and the National Health Service Institute for Innovation and Improvement (NHSIII). They had a closer formal relationship with government than the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE). Public funding is proportionately lower for higher education, and its status as a public service is increasingly contestable (Deem et al 2007).

The research team investigated whether the close or distanced nature of NLDB-government relationships affected the relative balance of focus of NLDB provision between promoting leaders’ change agency for reform or for independent agendas. We wanted to know how such provision might affect the self-perceptions as change agents of senior staff who had experienced it. Accordingly, a qualitative approach was adopted to grasp public discourses and the perceptions of key players, covering the sectors of secondary education, primary care trusts (PCTs—bodies for commissioning local healthcare provision), hospitals and higher education served by the three NLDBs mentioned above (depicted in bold type in Table 1). We also examined how senior staff in English education and health service organizations seek and experience external opportunities - whether from NLDBs or other providers - to support their development as leaders in relation to change. NLDBs were not the only source of development support available.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National Leadership Development Body</th>
<th>Public Service Sector</th>
<th>Formal Relationship with Central Government</th>
<th>Year of Inception or Reconfiguration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academy for Executive Leadership within the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA)</td>
<td>local government</td>
<td>distanced – formed as part of IDeA, owned by local authorities</td>
<td>1999 (IDeA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Care Institute for Excellence</td>
<td>social services</td>
<td>moderately close – set up as a result of departmental reform of social care. Now an independent charity but funded by department</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defence Leadership Centre within the Defence Academy</td>
<td>defence</td>
<td>close – Defence Academy set up as a result of the 2001 Defence Training Review, remit letter from Ministry of Defence. Executive Agency</td>
<td>2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Foundation for Higher Education</td>
<td>part-public funded higher education institutions</td>
<td>distanced – set-up by bodies representing higher education, financial support from UK funding councils via the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Company and charity</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National School of Government</td>
<td>civil service</td>
<td>close – National School of Government is a non-ministerial department</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Centre for Local Government</td>
<td>local government</td>
<td>distanced – impetus came from Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE); but supported and part-funded via central government. Charity</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement (superseding NHS Leadership Centre, part of NHS Modernization Agency, 2001-05)</td>
<td>state funded national health service</td>
<td>close – predecessor reconfigured and funded by central government department after a central government ‘arm’s length bodies’ review. Special Health Authority (arm’s length)</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre for Leadership (previously Fire Service College Leadership Centre) within the Fire and Rescue College</td>
<td>emergency fire service</td>
<td>close – set up as a result of strategy by central government; funded by department. Executive agency and trading fund</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning and Skills Improvement Service (superseding Centre for Excellence in Leadership 2003-8)</td>
<td>further education</td>
<td>moderately close – although new body is formally a company and charity, reconfiguration impetus and funding from department</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The remainder of the paper falls into three sections. First, the theoretical orientation and methods of data collection and analysis are outlined. Second, findings are summarized from documents and the accounts of government policymakers, NLDB staff and associates, and senior staff in public service organizations who had or had not experienced NLDB or other forms of external leadership development. Third, conclusions are drawn about why the mobilization of leadership turned out to be problematic as a policy lever, and what prospects there may be for promoting local improvement through leadership.

**Theorizing the Mobilization and Mediation of Leadership Development**

The conceptual orientation addressed two analytical levels and their reciprocal, evolutionary relationship: framing of perceptions, and their expression in the change process (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Conceptualizing the contribution of leadership development to public service reform
Ideological level. Discourse is underpinned by partially incompatible ideologies framing the struggle to legitimate preferred conceptions of provision, influencing the perceptions of stakeholders implicated in public service change. Each ideological discourse de-legitimates competitors, undermining their assumptive foundations and technical infrastructure. Policy discourses generate powerful narratives or ‘imaginaries’ (Fairclough 2003) to convince stakeholders that this way of seeing and doing is preferable. We initially identified two unequally competing ideologies. Managerialism, with increasing reference to leadership, promoted a radically different organizational logic from traditional bureau-professionalism (Farrell and Morris 2003) for delivering and assessing public services. The dominance of managerialism brought marginalization of the residual, longstanding ideology of professionalism. From our early findings, we identified a third, emergent, ideology of leaderism: a belief in elite systemic direction-setting through a hierarchically distributed pattern of persuasive influence. Such influence nurtures cultural change necessary for dissolving incompatible interests by fostering the collective pursuit of goals to realize a vision for improvement that becomes accepted as in the interests of all, so subordinating any sectional interests-at-hand that are incompatible with this vision. Through concentration on ‘winning hearts and minds’, leaderism fosters inclusive commitment amongst the expanding range of stakeholders engaged in new forms of organizational governance (O’Reilly and Reid 2010). It is promoted via the reprofessionalization—enhancing public service leadership’s standing as a profession—of senior service organization staff as leaders.

Social interaction level. The complexities of generating systemic change through developing leadership capacity to mobilize government-driven reform were captured through three interrelated concepts (Reed 2002; Deem et al 2007). Government-driven public service reform was construed as a political project informed by managerialism and related NPM policies. It is coupled with a discourse strategy to shape thinking through persuasive spoken language and written texts, and a loose configuration of control technologies (including NLDBs). They constitute means of translating political aspiration and discursive intent into practice. NLDBs operate as control technologies mainly through ‘culture management’ (Wallace and Pocklington 2002), a component of managerialism inspired by the cultural turn in management theory. They promote one-way acculturation, manipulating the organizational and professional cultures of participants so they assimilate (Berry 1997) beliefs, values and subliminal codes of behaviour favouring commitment to acculturators’ goals. However, stakeholders have variable capacity for mediation: modifying or subverting the practices and beliefs they are being encouraged to adopt (Spours et al 2007).

Policy-makers and senior NLDB staff orchestrate (Wallace 2004; 2007) the change that establishing NLDB provision represents. They broker its cultural acceptance and implementation or promote independent change agency. Orchestration implies a combination of leadership (but with limited capacity to decide the direction of change) and management to implement and consolidate change (but embodying limited engagement with detailed coordination tasks). Such orchestrators contribute to steering the brokering process and mediate change as it interacts with ideologically-framed discourses and institutionalized practices reflecting their organizational and professional cultures. Orchestration here spans administrative system boundaries, both within the national level (between the UK government’s Cabinet Office, its spending departments—including education and health—and NLDBs for particular service sectors) and between the national and service organization level (NLDBs and recipients of their provision from schools, healthcare organizations and higher education institutions). A combined cultural and political perspective on interaction (Wallace 2000) conceptualizes uses of power to acculturate senior staff through leadership development, and the mediatory responses of the latter through their recourse to uses of power according to their existing cultural allegiances.

Arrows in Figure 1 imply the directions of influence that we investigated: at the ideological level in a contest for domination; at the social interaction level within reform as an orchestrated change process of acculturation and its mediation across administrative levels; and between these analytical levels as the ideological struggle reciprocally influences the change process. At the ideological level we explored the flux of managerialism, professionalism and leaderism, and their linkage with social interaction, by tracking the evolution in England since 1997 of discourses of public service reform and change. Special reference was made to leadership development. Our complementary effort to explore the orchestration of
leadership development at the level of social interaction, and its linkage with these ideologies, had a triple focus. First, the variety of externally provided leadership development support activities which leaders sought and experienced, and why, with particular attention to the significance accorded to relevant national leadership development. Second, the acculturation and capacity-building processes, networks and mechanisms employed by these national bodies to orchestrate the implementation of modernization and other change agendas. Third, the extent to which those being trained or seeking leadership development perceived that activities offered by the appropriate NLDB had career significance and could inform their own capacity-building as change agents, and how far their leadership development needs were capable of being met in other ways.

Data Collection and Analysis

The qualitative design gave scope for in-depth understanding of policy-related discourses and perceptions amongst stakeholders in external leadership development. Limitations were that we could not resolve whether informants used discourses ‘bilingually’ (Hoyle and Wallace 2008) without commitment, to comply with perceived expectations, or whether the claims of informants about mediating reforms matched their observable practice. As indicated above, we investigated service sectors whose NLDB had contrasting degrees of association with central government. Within them, we focused on formal leaders and other senior staff from between four and six medium to large-sized service organizations (Table 2).

Table 2: Service sectors and National Leadership Development Bodies investigated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service sector served</th>
<th>Number of service organizations</th>
<th>NLDB</th>
<th>NLDB link with government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>largely public-funded schools (including secondary schools)</td>
<td>5 secondary schools</td>
<td>NCSL</td>
<td>close</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>largely public-funded health organizations (including PCTs and hospitals)</td>
<td>5 PCTs 4 Hospitals</td>
<td>NHSIII</td>
<td>close</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>part public-funded higher education institutions</td>
<td>6 higher education institutions</td>
<td>LFHE</td>
<td>distanced</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We opted to study secondary schools, as they are larger organizations with more senior staff than primary schools. We used two methods of data collection and analysis. First, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of public documents from 1997, mostly from websites (Table 3).

Table 3: Documentary data collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Documentary Sources (1997-2008)</th>
<th>No. Documents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government documents (central government, health and education departments)</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government documents addressed to NLDBs</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLDB documents (from NCSL, NHSIII, LFHE)</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sectoral professional association and other stakeholder documents</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>128</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Second, four rounds of semi-structured interviews with informants from different administrative levels (Table 4).
Table 4: Interview data collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of interviewee</th>
<th>Timing of Round, No. Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Summer 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Autumn 2007- Spring 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Spring-Summer 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 Summer-Autumn 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary schools (5), headteachers, senior staff</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Care Trusts (5), chief executives, senior staff, PEC Chairs</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitals (4), chief executives, senior staff</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEIs (6), vice chancellors, senior staff</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLDB senior staff, NLDB-associated trainers</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other HE leadership development providers</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional association representatives</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central government politicians, civil servants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total (218 interviews with 163 informants)</strong></td>
<td><strong>96</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>17</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>55</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Informants thus included staff from service organizations, NLDBs, central government, and national professional associations. We re-interviewed over half of the senior staff from Round 1 to address themes emerging from initial data analysis. Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed electronically. We also conducted a discourse analysis of Round 1 and 4 interviews with senior staff.

**Mobilizing (and Moderately Mediating) Leadership Development: Ideologies in Flux**

*Discourses of reform and links with leadership.* The government’s political project of public service reform reflected managerialism through four themes: technocratic management (performance management, targets) populist individualism (choice and voice, personalization for service ‘consumers’); service alliances (local strategic partnerships); and system efficacy (capacity-building, a measure of ‘earned autonomy’ for service organizations judged as effective according to centrally-set targets, comparative performance league-tables and inspections). However, the government’s discourse strategy also reflected the ideology of leaderism in discourses of leadership and its development, primarily within the theme of system efficacy through capacity-building and increasing ‘earned autonomy’ for high-performing service organizations. An illustration is offered by the following government policy statement for the schools sector, linking leadership and NCSL provision with reform policies of the day:

In England, the government is sustaining its commitment to education as a means to securing prosperity and social well-being. The White Paper of September 2001 sets out a demanding agenda for schools, including:

- building on the literacy and numeracy gains at Key Stage 2
- raising standards at Key Stage 3
- a more diverse curriculum with more vocational routes for older secondary pupils
- more opportunities for specialist and faith schools
- more support for teachers
- more autonomy for successful schools
- more choice in the supply of services
- intervention to tackle failure

The College [NCSL] will help school leaders to find their way through this agenda. We believe that confident and empowered leaders will use it to create a unique educational vision for their school.
The College will be a source of support, challenge and refreshment for leaders in their quest to renew and recreate their school (NCSL 2001).

This discourse strategy further legitimated the government project by representing the government itself as providing strategic leadership of public service-wide reform. The Prime Minister’s foreword to a pamphlet setting out the government’s reform ambitions made explicit the hierarchical distribution of transformational leadership for reforming all public services, as these extracts portray (OPSR 2002: 2-3):

Modernising our public services is crucial to everything the Government wants to achieve for the country.

Strong and high quality public services are essential if we are to achieve our central aim of spreading prosperity and opportunity. ...It needs us to play our part by providing an overall vision of where we must go and backing that with a real commitment to deliver that vision. ...I realise, as you do, how huge a task we face in transforming our public services. ...The goal is public services that give everyone, not just a few, real opportunity and security. ...I know we have a lot more to do. Without your support, your advice and your leadership we won’t be able to deliver.

Government would provide the overall vision for public service transformation with service organization leaders (the ‘you’ addressed here) in a supporting role, though one on which government acknowledged its dependence for promoting system-wide implementation. They must follow this overall vision in developing one for their jurisdiction—a component of the national standards for headteachers. The government logic was that service organization leaders should adopt goals for their organization that contribute towards achieving the government’s overarching transformational reform goal. Full-blown transformational leadership, extending to choice of vision, was thus a government preserve.

The expression of leaderism extended to developing leadership capacity in service organizations. The reasoning for this policy thrust was pithily portrayed by one senior civil servant as self-evident: ‘It’s like “the economy, stupid!” It’s leadership, stupid…you’ve just got to address that issue.’ The governmental leadership discourse encompassed agency (including for reform), responsibility for performance and improvement (incorporating managerialism), and location at multiple organizational levels within and between services, linking with the reform themes of technocratic management and partnership working. Three discourses of leadership were discernable: transformational (commonest), distributed (regular), and public servant (occasional).

Strikingly, the notion of leadership was very widespread across all documentary sources. Informants based at every administrative level - from central government, through NLDBs, to service organizations - almost universally identified with being a leader in their own organizational setting. Indicatively, a senior central government civil servant noted: ‘It was undoubtedly a leadership role, first in responsibility for the staff I had...I was also a leader of the public service reform across government.’ A university dean of faculty construed the responsibilities of this leader role as:

Leading the management team to deliver the objectives of the School, and the strategic plan of the School. It is leading the development of the strategic plan, and, yes, in fact leading each initiative, be it leading the marketing and recruitment of the School, leading the space reconsiderations of the School, leading the reconsideration of the course portfolio.

NLDB and professional association leadership discourses largely mirrored those of central government, consistent with its political project. Possibly reflecting greater residual professionalism in higher education framing its long tradition of academic autonomy, the LFHE gave more emphasis to distributed leadership.

Senior staff discourses reflected versions of transformational and, less commonly, distributed leadership, associating it with individual agency—but not necessarily linked with government-driven reform. They did associate their leadership role with being change agents for reform, though not simply this, suggesting some acculturation (or, more certainly, compliance) as reformers. Conversely, the only partial alignment of their reform and leadership discourses with those of government implied moderate mediation of the
change in service organization culture and practice that the government advocacy of leadership embodied.

**Discourses of leadership development.** The government’s leadership development discourse reflected leaderism in portraying both the government and NLDBs as components of reform itself. Leadership development was construed as a means of enhancing leaders’ agency, change implementation skills, and culture as leaders. NLDBs operated as a control technology, acculturating senior staff towards leading reform, though not exclusively. Compared with ‘hard’ (mandate-plus-sanction based) target and accountability control technologies, NLDBs very largely represented a ‘soft’ (inducement-plus-support based), ‘culture management’ technology, drawing on traditions of professional development. Promoting leaders’ agency suggests that leaderism, in contrast to managerialism, concerns acculturating reformers. The aspiration seems to be that they will voluntarily deploy their agency in adapting reforms within current policy fostering responsiveness to local community needs and ‘citizen-consumer’ (Clarke et al 2007) preferences. Indeed, government discourse of generic reform articulated the requirement for ‘cross-sector’ leadership development, implying inter-NLDB collaboration in developing boundary-spanning leaders encompassing multiple sectors.

NLDBs substantially reproduced the government’s leadership development discourse (distinguishing senior from ‘frontline’ staff more consistently than several health service documents which blurred this distinction). The LFHE represented higher education senior staff as independent of government, reflecting the sector’s greater autonomy. While each NLDB depicted leadership development as including distributed leadership, provision mainly targeted the most senior staff and ‘middle-leaders’ rather than frontline staff. NLDBs thus support an elite reprofessionalization of senior staff and aspirants as leaders. Leaderism, as implemented via NLDBs, apparently favours the agency of senior staff over frontline staff, creating potential for a schism in the residual ideology of professionalism. Further, while cast in terms of ‘leadership development’, attention was almost exclusively paid to leaders. Accounts of provision did not extend to others included by definition within the leadership nexus: those in roles as collaborators or followers. Thus the discourse of leadership development belied the restrictive focus on what may be labelled as ‘leader development’.

Senior staff expressed diffuse leadership development discourses, suggesting some distancing from the government discourse strategy. The strongest (expressed by a quarter) was associated with self-development. They chimed with government and NLDB elite reprofessionalization discourses promoting leaders’ agency and their ‘new professionalism’, but were not wholly aligned with the governmental aspiration about the reforming uses to which the agency of senior service organization staff, as leaders, should be put.

Overall, these discourses mainly reflected the dominant ideology of managerialism. Residual professionalism was being partially reworked through the reprofessionalization of leaders within emergent leaderism.

**Ideologically Informed Take-up of Leadership Development Opportunities**

The range of leadership development activities experienced. Leadership development was popular with our senior service organization staff: two thirds had sought or experienced NLDB provision, and three-quarters alternative provision, since 1997. Those accessing these development opportunities were at all senior career stages in secondary schools, but it was less widely experienced amongst the most senior staff in other sectors. The commonest form (about half) across all sectors comprised substantial programmes of more than five days. Such provision was sought more extensively from NLDBs than alternative providers in all sectors except hospitals. Other providers were more commonly sought for alternative activities including one-to-one or group support and short courses. The significant, yet still limited, reach of NLDBs and the popularity of alternative provision constrained their acculturation potential. We also note that their dominant mode—away-from-the-workplace training—is a weak means of changing practice compared with workplace support (e.g. Eraut and Hirsh 2007), such as mentoring and job rotation.
Motivations for seeking external leadership development. Senior staff (roughly half) most commonly sought external leadership development to improve their personal practice generically, reflecting a strong ethic of 'professionality' (Hoyle 1974). It was diffusely expressed as developing their thinking or approach, as with a hospital director of nursing: ‘Natural curiosity…you always think that you can do things a bit better…you can learn some tools and techniques.’ One motivation for a third was being selected or recommended to undertake leadership development. In the words of a university dean of faculty, ‘I felt flattered by the attention, and that I felt that people were taking care of my career.’ Another, also for a third, was to enhance their career through promotion or preparation for it—indicative of their reprofessionalization as leaders through credentialized career and status progression. Thus senior staff motivations were not primarily concerned with contributing to reform.

Conversely, no informants rejected provision because of any perceived link with developing them as reformers. We found no evidence of either covert resistance to government through refusing to engage with external leadership development, or of subversion by setting up alternative opportunities. Any mediation was modest at most of the government-sponsored mobilization of leadership through leadership development. Rather, low credibility of provision was the commonest reason (mentioned by a third) for eschewing it. One secondary school deputy headteacher had rejected short courses: ‘How to be a deputy head’, ‘How to manage conflict and staff’…you can’t learn that in a day, but the implication is that you will.’ A few in each sector (other than hospitals) stated that external leadership development had no career relevance, implying their rejection of the career progression logic underlying such provision. Limited reach (and so restricted potential impact on practice), alongside a significant career interest amongst senior staff, suggest that its acculturation potential was moderate.

The evidence therefore portrayed how, on the one hand, NLDBs were strategically placed as significant providers to acculturate senior staff as conduits for reform. On the other, the main motivations among senior staff for seeking leadership development (or not) concerned their personal development and career enhancement. The predisposition of senior staff towards their reprofessionalization as leaders reflected the attraction of expanding their agency in self-promoting their individual advancement. But it had created unfavourable conditions for their strong acculturation as reformers.

NLDB Mobilization (and Moderate Mediation) of Leadership Development for Reform

NLDB orchestration of public service reform. The government’s discourse strategy was partly orchestrated through allying the NCSL and NHSIII briefs with public service reform, so creating conditions for acculturation. The NLDBs for schools and health had been subject to government review, generating their current role specification. The LFHE had no formal reform link. NLDB documents, informants and associated trainers significantly reproduced the government’s discourses of leadership and its development, stressing transformational leadership (LFHE less so, though transformational leadership still featured). NLDB activities centred on training provided or commissioned, other support and applied research. Two framed provision through independently developed maps of expectations: the NCSL’s Leadership Development Framework (NCSL 2001) and the NHSIII’s NHS Leadership Qualities Framework inherited from its predecessor (NHS Leadership Centre 2003). (The LFHE had resisted the recommendation of a consultant to develop its own leadership competence framework.) Reach was extended, primarily by the NCSL, through web-based resources. The NCSL and NHSIII, especially, operated as a control technology in disseminating the government’s discourses of leadership and its development.

NLDBs’ promulgated conception of change agency revealed how NLDB orchestrators had moderately mediated the mobilization of leadership development. This view of change agency did encompass, though not exclusively, government-driven reforms. Staff were conceptualised as initiating and implementing change of generally unspecified origin, leaving room for acculturation towards reform or mediatory interpretation. A senior member of NHSIII staff pointed to the generic focus of its provision: ‘A core part of leadership development has got to be around change capability…tools and techniques for change. And I believe that every senior leader in the NHS…needs to have those skills.’ So NLDB orchestrators appeared to have used their authority to establish provision that neither solely addressed nor challenged the government’s political project. They diluted the potency of NLDB provision for...
acculturating leaders as reformers by generically acculturating leaders as change agents for any improvement thrust. A senior NCSL staff member hinted at this dilution in describing the generic nature of NLDB provision:

We don’t have a model, if you like, of leadership. We support approaches to leadership which would include things like...the ability to read context, such as having well developed interpersonal skills, such as having high levels of self-awareness and self-management, such as technical understanding, knowledge and understanding of...what is the job about, and the core purpose of schools is learning and teaching.

About half the senior staff from each sector reported an emphasis in the leadership development they had experienced on change agency: mainly leading and managing change but also spanning self-reflection during change, generating transformation, and altering culture. Informants did not perceive such instances as promoting government reforms. Several examples of independent change were mentioned, but all were compatible with the reform thrust. NLDBs thus reproduced only certain elements of the government's discourse of reform: especially leadership, an emphasis on cultural change, and the necessity for service improvement. Equally, senior staff did not report any NLDB advocacy of alternative visions or practices to which generic transformational leadership might be directed. NLDB mediation was demonstrably limited to dilution of leadership development as means of mobilizing reform, encouraging participants to decide whether and how to implement particular reforms rather than fostering subversive or tangential agendas.

Separate development of Sectoral NLDB provision. The government promotion of leadership development in different sectors through the NLDB form of control technology did not amount to a coordinated cross-public service strategy for promoting the implementation of reforms. The provenance of each NLDB was different, as their varied dates of inception reflect (Table 1). Moreover, we found little evidence of synergy between NLDBs, with several informants referring to the potential for competition or constraints on the operation of individual development bodies. One senior NLDB member noted: ‘What is problematic is where do you strike the point at which [sharing] is not just extensive, but it is becoming excessive and it is actually stopping you from getting on?’

However a formal—if merely invitational—arrangement for inter-NLDB exchange was in place. All NLDBs participated in the centrally-orchestrated Public Service Leadership Alliance (PSLA), a very light-touch forum involving occasional voluntary meetings. Each NLDB we investigated also had some links with other NLDBs. Several members of LFHE staff had been recruited from the NCSL or the National School of Government. A senior LFHE informant commented how ‘they’ve been able to say, “This is how we did things in our body.” which I think was incredibly helpful - their perspective and take on how we could do things.’

Government informants spoke of coordinating, not imposing, NLDB activities. While leadership development was part of the government’s reform project, it was not directly orchestrated. Indeed, senior NLDB staff stressed the importance of sectorally-contextualized provision for credibility with participants, where generic leadership ideas were applied to particular settings. Their orchestration activity was mediatory in promoting largely siloized, generic but sector-sensitive NLDB provision. This disjointed orchestration of sectorized leadership development across the national level reflects enduring government ‘departmentalism’ (Kavanagh and Richards 2001) in the face of the much-publicized drive towards ‘joined-up government’ (Cabinet Office 1999; Bogdanor 2005). Ironically, this thrust was consistent with the perceptions of NLDB senior staff, as leaders, legitimately deploying the agency that this status legitimated them to exercise in fulfilling a sectoral NLDB vision. The ideology of leaderism thus framed mediation by NLDB leaders of the government attempt to mobilize leadership development in order, in turn, to mobilize reform.

In sum, the extensive array of provision mounted by the NLDBs in our study evidenced the extent to which government resources were being invested in developing leaders who would, in part, operate as agents of government-driven reform. Yet despite the strictures of the government brief for the NCSL and NHSIII, orchestrators in these NLDBs and the LFHE (whose formal relationship with government was
more distant) appeared moderately to have mediated the government emphasis on leading reform. Their provision focused on generic leadership ideas and change agency which included consideration of reforms but left participants to decide whether and how to address them alongside independent agendas. Each NLDB operated independently of the others, with different lines of accountability. Each orchestrated its provision independently, with minimal inter-NLDB coordination and exchange of ideas.

The Mediatory Impact of Mobilizing Service Leaders through NLDB Provision

The career significance of experiencing NLDB provision. As noted earlier, NLDB provision had proved widely attractive to senior staff in service organizations. But the main motivations for this take-up may have diluted its impact as a control technology for mobilizing agents of reform. A third of senior staff did testify to the importance of external leadership development provision, but for furthering their career. A fifth, from schools, stressed that provision provided credentials for leadership progression (mostly in relation to the required preparatory qualification in this sector for headship). A headteacher testified to its career importance: ‘I was going to do a masters in education [degree course]...that was the route. And then that changed, and it was like there’s no point in doing that, so you need to do the NPQH if you want to get any further in leadership.’ By contrast, three-fifths of senior staff claimed the impact of NLDB and other provision to be more on their thinking about their change agency than on their leadership activity (significant minorities in schools and PCTs, marginal in hospitals and HE institutions). Only a minority in each sector reported any direct impact on their practice, and even then it tended to be diffuse. Illustratively, a PCT director of planning had become more reflective in practice:

When I’ve been doing things like pulling together papers, I think I’ve more consciously been asking myself, why am I doing this? Why am I giving it to the Board? What am I asking the Board to do?...I definitely feel less obliged to just churn out a paper and probably think more about an intelligent paper.

A sizeable minority perceived that the accumulating job experience central to their learning could be facilitated by other forms of support. NLDB provision was therefore viewed as often useful for informing practice, but seldom sufficient for improving it.

Mediating reform through developing leaders as change agents. Virtually all senior staff (regardless of NLDB provision experience) confirmed their proclivity to mediate government-driven reforms. They saw themselves as leaders who were change agents, consistent with the government’s discourse strategy. Yet while half saw this role to encompass faithfully implementing reforms, two-thirds perceived it to include adapting them, and two-thirds to include taking independent initiatives. A hospital director of strategic development captured this partial distancing from the government’s reform agenda:

It’s a pretty uninspiring vision to say, ‘Our vision is we’re going to implement government policy.’ So if you’re wanting people to go with you on the journey, then having a broader vision which makes sense locally and is articulated in a way which has meaning locally, is a much better way to make progress.

Overall, the policy discourse of leadership, underpinned by the ideology of leaderism, had a significant acculturational effect on senior staff. Yet it was only partly achieved through NLDBs. The implicit relationship between senior service organization staff as change agents and government diverged more from government discourse, since they had not been acculturated to see themselves primarily as agents for government-driven reform.

A picture emerges of NLDB provision as essentially a valued route to career enhancement, contributing towards the reprofessionalization of senior staff as leaders highlighted earlier. In the words of one PCT director:

…fundamentally what it was about was it was teaching you to be a - well, it was enabling you to find a place where you could be a confident, independently thinking and effective chief executive...It was also about helping me to build up further knowledge about myself, to help me move on in my career.
NLDBs represented a quite powerful ‘soft’ control technology for mobilizing senior staff through their acculturation as change agents who addressed reforms within the wider improvement agendas that it was legitimate for them to adopt as leaders. Nevertheless, these agendas did not challenge reforms. But it seemed weak as a control technology in acculturating them as reformers. Indeed, senior service organization staff referred to ‘harder’ control technologies requiring behavioural compliance rather than acculturation as more directly influencing their practice. Even the relatively autonomous university sector was profoundly affected by resourcing policies, as witnessed by a dean of faculty:

Anything that has money attached to it is very powerful. So, when they say we’re funding this but we’re not funding that, it has a change in behaviour attached to it, and so you need to manage that change of behaviour, and you need to lead through that - and that’s even when you may disagree with the way in which the government’s policy is being formulated.

In addition to differential resource allocation in higher education, hard control technologies included government-imposed performance management regimes in schools and healthcare, and external accountability mechanisms in all sectors.

Claimed impacts of provision were largely diffuse and more educational than practical, primarily informing reflection on change agency and leadership. Shaping senior staff discourse in this way suggests a benign, palliative irony (Hoyle and Wallace 2008) for government policy-makers. Attempted acculturation through NLDBs focusing on change agency as leaders may have encouraged senior staff to use power in accordance with their existing professional culture as moderately mediatory change agents: adaptively implementing reform alongside other improvements, within the bounds of acceptability to government. The soft control technology of leadership development, underpinned by leaderism and supported by senior service organization staff bent on their reprofessionalization as leaders, appeared relatively impotent. Hard control technologies reflecting the still dominant ideology of managerialism were more powerful. The government may have failed to win the hearts and minds of senior staff for its reforms. But it had largely succeeded in assuring their behavioural compliance.

Developing Leaders in England: Problems and Prospects

What does the balance-sheet look like for the New Labour government investment in external leadership development, concentrating on developing leaders through sectoral NLDBs? From a government perspective, the investment generated one significant problem. The endeavour to mobilize senior service organization staff by acculturating them as agents of reform had unwittingly created conditions favouring its systemic, if modest, mediation. The dissipation of leadership development as a means of opening-up a conduit for the faithful implementation of reforms was brought about partly by NLDB orchestrators. They mobilized leadership development in a mediatory way through establishing provision which was both more concerned with generic leadership than directly linked to implementing government-driven service reforms, and sectorally-contextualized. Such mediation proved possible not only where the NLDB was formally semi-autonomous (LFHE) and might be expected to emphasize institution-level agendas first and foremost. It equally occurred in the two NLDBs closely associated with, and scrutinized by, the relevant government spending department (NCSL and NHSIII).

Dissipation was extended further by senior service organization staff taking-up this generic provision. They apparently used their power to mediate by paying selective attention to the acculturation effort that their experience of NLDB provision represented. The messages they received were reported to be largely consistent with their existing culture, and stimulated reflection more than action. In assisting recipients’ reprofessionalization as leaders, the NLDB provision seemed to have reinforced their sense that they were agents of change on their own behalf, as service professionals. They felt empowered to adopt, legitimately, a relatively distanced stance towards reform and the content of leadership development provision, harnessing both towards the pursuit of their own enduring organizational vision, underpinned by their equally enduring cultural values.
Most important, whether or not they had experienced NLDB provision, senior service organization staff generally perceived that their very mobilization as leaders integrally entitled them to express their professional and service values related to their existing culture. Most claimed moderately to have mediated reforms through adapting them rather than implementing them faithfully in accordance with the practices envisaged by government ministers, alongside the pursuit of independent agendas that might be tangential—but not inimical—to the reform thrust. So some acculturation had clearly occurred, if not quite as government ministers would have wished.

Given how recently discourses of leadership have emerged in the public services, it was noteworthy how universally our informants had assimilated into their culture explicit beliefs and values about being transformational leaders or contributors to hierarchically distributed leadership and, more implicitly, about being change agents. But this acculturation did not extend to their—possibly deeper and more longstanding—professional and service beliefs and values. Since those who had not experienced NLDB provision equally perceived themselves as leaders of change, it did not seem to be the most significant source of this remarkable acculturation, though it undoubtedly played a reinforcing role. The prevalence of leaderism underpinning the extensiveness of leadership terminology in government documents could offer a clue, in that governmental discourse strategy of promoting leadership discourse might conjecturally have had a greater acculturating impact. But the mass media and other sources of ideas could have been equally influential. Either way, external leadership development for the schools and health sectors appears to have constituted a readily mediated technology of control for the political project of reform, though it was congruent with and so probably supportive of the broader discourse strategy.

However, the mediation problem was not serious for government. Our evidence indicates that the mediation was constrained by institutionalized power relations that framed the ‘room for manoeuvre’ available to senior staff in service organizations. The mobilization of external leadership development for reform far outweighed its mediation. Senior service organization staff widely acknowledged how the ‘hard’ accountability measures introduced by central government had firmly bounded their proclivity to mediate. Arguably, government and NLDB promotion of transformational leadership was implicitly encouraging senior service organization staff to express largely ‘transmissional’ leadership (Hoyle and Wallace 2005) for politically-driven service transformation. The latter role was to translate the government’s political mission into public service practice, through a restricted form of transformational leadership to implement reforms consistent with the government’s vision.

Prospects for realizing the potential of leadership development initiatives. The mild mediation problem may, conversely, have constituted a significant element of the potential of leadership development to serve a complementary government interest in ongoing service improvement efforts. The promotion of leadership embodying change agency which is moderately mediatory of reforms through local adaptation may foster the successful implementation of generalized reforms which require some adaptation to make them work in the contingent circumstances of a specific organizational setting. Moderately mediated mobilization of leadership development may have been more of a help than a hindrance to government-driven reform. It also chimed with the government policy shift toward greater local control of service improvement within parameters set by central government (Newman and Clarke 2009). We note also how the surveillance and accountability regime mentioned above would continue to delimit the scope for leadership of local service improvement according to a locally articulated vision. It must comply with government requirements. Thus the prospects for leadership development to foster local service improvement look quite positive, insofar as the recently incoming Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government (in May 2010) has sustained much investment in NLDBs to date, despite radically cutting public expenditure.

The hitherto separate development of NLDBs offers potential for improving provision through greater coordination between them on initiatives ranging from joint cross-sector programmes to more innovation backed by exchange of expertise and good practice. The prospects here are less optimistic. Members of our project team were consulted towards the end of the research as part of a Cabinet Office review of leadership development provision across the public services. We recommended that a stronger ‘central hub and NLDB nodes for each public service sector’ model of provision was needed to generate greater
synergy between NLDBs, and reduce gaps and overlap. Our view is reflected in the recommendations of
the report, which included the proposal (Cabinet Office 2009b: 4) to:

Strengthen the self-improvement function of the [leadership] academies by expanding the
composition of the PSLA and strengthening its role as an improvement body, with defined
improvement objectives, an action plan for delivery, processes to track progress, and increased
corporate oversight led by a permanent secretary with support from the Cabinet Office.

The New Labour government response to this report was to give the PSLA the new label of ‘Public
Service Leadership’ (PSL) and reconfigure it as a pilot project funded by annual subscription from each
NLDB. No additional central government investment appears to have been made by the successor
coalition government. PSL ‘partners’ now include the NLDB ‘Public Service Management Wales’, serving
all public service sectors in the Principality. The PSL (2009) has begun to promote collaborative working,
for example through inaugurating an annual conference, maintaining a website, and developing a new
cross-sectoral ‘Top Leaders Development Programme’. At the time of writing, the second run of this
programme is on hold while the consequences of government public expenditure cuts work through to
service budgets. So the PSL remains a weak form of hub. Authority over NLDB provision still rests
exclusively with each NLDB and, as appropriate, the relevant government spending department. So also
does the survival of the PSL as a pilot project, since the PSL’s future is dependent on the next year’s
tranche of funding from each contributing partner. It remains to be seen how far this arrangement proves
capable of sustaining its precarious funding base by harnessing the full potential for NLDB synergy while
sufficiently serving the diversity of sectoral NLDB interests. The structured power relations between PSL
and NLDBs continues to create favourable conditions for NLDB mediation far to outweigh any PSL
mobilization.

A recent OECD report on ‘making reform happen’ suggests that the international future of leadership
development is assured, at least for now. The report articulates a need for a transformational form of
leadership across nine fields of public policy, including education and healthcare: ‘advancing successful
leadership is often about winning consent rather than securing compliance. This is particularly the case
where those directly affected by a reform will play a role in implementing it.’ (OECD 2010: 17) The
advocacy of ‘winning consent’ through leadership implicitly recognizes the dependence of governments
on the service organization staff responsible for putting their reforms into effect, just as senior staff
ultimately depend on their ‘frontline’ colleagues. But the prospects seem uncertain for ongoing coalition
government commitment to developing leaders in the English public services. Will the system for
developing leaders in the English public services lead or buck the international trend? In a climate of
financial austerity the inherently problematic nature of leadership development as a policy lever, coupled
with the diffuseness of any impact on service performance, may render it increasingly vulnerable as a
candidate for future public expenditure cuts. But in its favour is the emergent power of leaderism, holding
out the promise to government ministers, NLDB senior staff, and senior service organization staff alike of
a means for winning others’ consent for making their vision of improvement happen.

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