



The risks of exercising leadership when it matters

Recognising why we do this work

Each of us came into the work of changing the world for a reason. Many of us may have a deep sense of social justice or simple fairness. This may have been instilled in us when we were children. We may have watched our mum or dad stand up for someone. We may have felt injustice inflicted upon us and never forgotten it.

We may be honouring a learned sense of duty, believing it is good to do something for others. We may have stumbled into friendship and joined others who were fighting their own cause. We may unconsciously be trying to heal damage to ourselves by working to prevent further damage to others. We may be operating out of fear of what might happen if we don't do something. We may have come into the world of social justice through chance, not design.

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We may not know yet what brought us to this work. If we don't know why we are here, it is worth spending some time trying to discover the reason. If you are unaware of your own motivation, you can mislead yourself. It is important to recognise whether the source of the motivation is essentially love or fear. The consequences are significant.

Exercising leadership

Exercising leadership is often about making something happen, encouraging and taking action. It is about taking a position, speaking up, identifying ourselves as not just one of the crowd.

Some of us see other people who inspire us to act, some of us suddenly find ourselves at the front of the crowd. Some struggle to obtain positions of influence. Some become trapped in a complex web of competing interests.

Some can find themselves undertaking leadership not because they wanted to, but reluctantly, because no one else spoke up.

When we do find ourselves in a position of leadership we become vulnerable. The act of standing up for something means that you are taking a position. Whenever you take a position, you set up a counter position. You may be clear what you stand for – others make sense of it by defining what you don't stand for. Being pro-something is twisted into being anti-something else.

For example, anyone who declares that they believe in the benefits of inclusive education is constantly asked to explain why they don't believe in the benefits of special education. This is part of the territory. Exercising leadership is about declaring a position and leading people to it. Whilst the skills of consensus building are important, there are times when you have to be clear who and what you stand for. Others will constantly challenge you over these matters.

Recognising who or what you are working on behalf of

When you are trying to make change happen you have to be able to operate outside your "home" territory. Most people are trying to effect change out there, in the real world. That means that they have to have influence, be heard and exert pressure out there, in the real world. You don't make change happen by staying home, watching East Enders.

Many people who are affected by impairment, illness, or significant difference, find themselves trying to change the parallel world of Service Land. These people become veterans of service reform. They spend their time and energy living within the compound of services, negotiating with people who are employees of Service Land about reform within Service Land.

We know there are significant power differences between people who design, deliver and manage human services and the people who rely on receiving them. Namely, the first group generally have the money, the staff and the resources. The second group need them. Employees of the system have significant legal power over members of the public. Social workers have statutory power over the protection of children. Psychiatrists can place people under section. Educational psychologists have enormous influence over where your child is going to be educated.

The human service system has a historical legacy of “care and control”. There is endless tension between statutory enforcement and capacity building, social work provision and community development. We are essentially caught in the cross fire between these conflicting forces:

Exercising statutory social control over people	Empowering people to manage themselves
“Knowing what’s best”	Asking what might work
Believing that they are working with the best of intentions and in the best interests of the people they serve	Being accountable to people and being of service

When people who have been traditionally viewed as powerless are trying to make things change within a system that has traditionally exercised “power over” people, there are many dangers.

Keeping your supporters on board

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Leaders are given their position by people who support, admire and trust them. Maintaining the support of your supporters and key allies will sustain you in the struggle. However, all change involves both sides agreeing to give up something. When leaders are in a negotiating position, they run the risk of disappointing their own core supporters, their key core allies every time they negotiate a deal. They are at risk of being seen as compromising, or selling out, or betraying their supporters.

Leaders are similarly at risk of being ineffective in delivering change. If they are too dependent on the flattery and endorsement of their supporters, their position might be too inflexible. They may be unwilling to confront and convince their supporters that they might have to adjust their position to secure a deal. They are then unable to make change happen at all.

Anyone exercising leadership has to be conscious of the dangers and reflect on how they are safeguarding themselves from such dangers.