

Leaders on Leadership

Conversations with 20 Scottish leaders in the field of social justice

Over a period of 4 weeks between October and November 2002, Heather Anderson and Isobel Brown of Scottish Human Services Trust interviewed 20 individuals on the topic of leadership in the field of social justice and social inclusion.

The individuals interviewed were either in key leadership positions within the social justice and social inclusion movement in Scotland or they were training and recruiting new leaders.

This report seeks to draw together, often in the contributors' own words, the recurrent themes from the interviews.

The report is for distribution to the 20 individuals concerned and not for publication at this stage.

Heather Anderson
March 2003

Julie – can you insert the logo and contact details here

Leaders on leadership

Cultural discomfort with the term leader

Many people we spoke to declared dissatisfaction with the traditional, archetypal view of leaders as white, male, privileged and militaristic in style. All thought this dominant model was unhelpful, inhibiting and counter cultural in the areas of interest they were working – be this the church, the gay/lesbian movement, the disability movement, community development, the black movement, the inclusion movement etc.

This distaste was echoed in the discomfort in using the word leader – many were easier with the term change agent or activist. Most were more comfortable with the concept of people exercising leadership, rather than occupying the job of leader.

This posed some problems for us initially, as we made the argument for reclaiming the language of leadership and redefining the traditional, archetypal model of leadership.

Some talked about their preference for the concept of collective leadership as opposed to individual leadership and the need to mobilise people to act collectively:

“This is an expression of an idea and this is more powerful than what any particular individual does or even any one in the organisation.”

“The leaders that I admire and respect are the ones who are driven not by personal ambition, but by cause and by a desire to achieve a goal and to do that by collected means. Therefore the manifestation of their leadership would be through a collective approach, rather than simply individual achievement.”

However, there was also a clear acknowledgement that leadership was important:

“I just think strong leadership is really, really important on a whole number of different levels and I feel that I don't think we pay enough attention to encouraging leadership skills or leadership behaviour. I actually think there is quite a lot in the Scottish psyche, in the state education system, which works against developing the confidence required to exercise leadership.”

Many were initially reluctant to describe themselves as leaders. However the same people became significantly more comfortable with the role as the interviews progressed and they felt able to define their own leadership preferences.

Leadership and being of service

Many talked about leadership in reality being about being of service, and following the people you have lead to action. A number talked about the need to be an enabling and facilitative leader. One referred to a quote from a man fighting his way through the mob in the French Revolution, shouting, "Let me through, let me through, I have to follow them. I am their leader."

"You exercise the role in the service of the whole."

"Leadership is about transcending the ego."

"Whatever I do in my role as a leader, I'm just following through what they want, so it's not really me."

Others stressed the need to enable others to take the limelight and not seek validation and celebrity yourself:

"What matters is what the outcomes are, not whether anybody remembers that you were involved in making that happen. This is not always a comfortable place to be."

"I think I consciously try and work on this thing about it doesn't really matter who's done it or who's said it, as long as it gets said or it gets done. The point of the mission is for it to happen, not for us to have done it. So consciously I say that a lot."

People talked about exercising leadership as if they were participating dancers and performers in an Irish Ceilidh, where it was important to know when to "act" and when to step back. At times you had to act, be direct, be forceful. At other times you had to sit on the sidelines.

Another said it was important to know what the group needed:

"You have to know when to sustain and when to inspire others. You have to know how to help people get through difficult times."

What people looked for in leaders

Despite this discomfort initially with the word leader, people contributed a great deal to this question. The people we spoke to admired a wide range of personal qualities - courage, persistence, generosity of spirit, and the ability not to harbour resentment.

They thought leaders should be skilled at enabling, reflecting, guiding, informing, coaching and facilitating. They required self-awareness, a willingness to learn, vision and the ability to see capacity in others.

Leaders needed confidence and charisma. As well as having to be highly organised, they needed to be able to get other people to buy into what they were saying. They needed to be able to use humour, charisma and charm.

“My job as a leader is to help make stuff happen.”

Leaders were people who:

“Are willing to engage with conflict and difficulties in life and don’t look for easy answers.”

“I think leadership is about people saying I’ll take responsibility for that. I’ve seen something that needs doing and I’ll take responsibility for doing it.”

Leaders needed “energy and enthusiasm” and “depth of political analysis”. They had to be able to explain the history and why things were an issue. Movements needed a “keeper of the history.”

One admired strong analytic power, strong moral content and a strong commitment to act. Many picked up on the importance of moral conduct:

“Leadership is personal conduct.”

“Leadership is just about the power of example.”

“You have to do the right thing, to ask yourself what the right thing is and to do it.”

One person interviewed stressed the need to exercise discernment, through a process of deep reflection with colleagues. The leader had to be authentic in the true sense, meaning that which is coming from the self. They had to be “a centred self rather than be a self centred person”. They had to admire the power of love, rather than the love of power. They had to be capable of “exercising true charisma, meaning real charisma, which is of the spirit and from the soul as opposed to false charisma, which was hypnotic manipulation”.

Picking up on the theme of authenticity, one person talked about the need to be a grafter:

“Your authority comes from being a grafter, being there. You have to have a passion, a vision, an argument – you need to have something you can get your teeth in to.”

“I think it's just through grafting and being there and always turning up and being reliable as well. People will say she turns up to everything, she does come when she says she will, she does what she says she will.”

Conduct in the role was crucial and difficult:

“It's much easier to conduct yourself as a manager because of the organisational rules that you set up do that. But as a leader, you may not be in an organisation at all and you're certainly not governed by organisational rules in the same way. So your personal conduct is just much more important in how you look after yourself and how you keep yourself going and how you balance what's in it for you with what's in it for the thing that you're trying to lead.”

People had to exercise their power consciously and carefully. One talked about “adjusting the volume”, meaning that they used their status and power when necessary to make an impact and underplayed it at other times. Consciousness of how it was perceived by others was essential.

One talked about how their leadership style had significantly changed, from being initially very angry and attacking to being more mellow, more tolerant and more tender. They had changed from externalising the issue, to internalising it. This change had been forced upon them through;

“Sorry experiences of mishandling situations – when you do things wrong enough times it kind of daunts you.”

Some people had favourite sets of criteria. One person talked about six key capabilities required by leaders:

“Thinking, visioning, inspiring, building relationships, leading change and having a very strong personal ethics or value base.”

Another talked about 5 essentials:

“Communication, Consensus building, Confidence, Co-ordination and Creativity.”

One described to us how they had developed their ideas about five distinct leadership types, with the following key characteristics:

- **Heroic leaders** – who were wonderful in crisis and brilliant communicators but tended to work within limited timescales and fit the time/ context specifically.
- **Entrepreneurial leaders** – who were brilliant at being able to pull together different things. They didn't necessarily create new, but they combined different concepts or technologies to make a new product or a new approach

and they then sold. They can act serially, so once they have done it once, they will then go on and do it again, but they actually use the same process each time.

- **Managerial leadership** - who were generally under-rated but who were able to lead change within large systems effectively over time. They were neither glamorous nor in the headlines, but they made change within large systems happen.
- **Thought leaders** - who really changed our understanding of the way the world works. Continuously questioning and testing, organisations don't know how to deal with them and found them difficult to accommodate.
- **Social leaders** – who worked from an incredibly strong ethics or value base. Everything they did was driven by their values and lead to long term social change. They largely operated outside the system, challenged the system and worked over very long time frames. They worked by starting to pull a group of likeminded people together and then spreading their ideas outwards.

What had helped people take up and sustain leadership roles

People talked about the need for this commitment to an idea to mirror deep-rooted values within them personally. Some talked about Christian socialism, or a deep sense of social justice instilled in them by their parents:

“Mum always liked to stick up for people...she was always fierce about respecting them.”

“My mother might have been afraid, but it's never stopped her challenging people and either saying I disagree or you're not going to do that.... so I think I would model myself on people who exercise courage in the face of authority or in the face of threat.”

“I suppose, from early childhood, I internalised this feeling that I was supposed to be of service in some way, I had to bring alive part of what went with that was trying to be of service in some way and to make things better and to fix things and to sort out things, that it wasn't enough to get on with your own life and get by.”

Many talked about basic religious or political views they were exposed to as children. Many also referred to the fact they had been given tremendous confidence:

“My dad ...was really a practical man, he was an engineer, and he just used to fix everything at home, practically everything. Actually what he did was he gave me the sense that you can do anything... you can start with two screws. Just begin, and you can do it. It was an incredibly kind of positive message and I didn't realise until now how amazing that was. It just means I'm not afraid of things.”

Reluctant leaders

There was a general sense that people ended up as leaders, almost by default.

“ Well I don’t know. I suppose we are leaders because we set out with a mission and we have achieved that...but ...talking about seeing ourselves as leaders as a dominant ideology – no.”

“It just sort of happened. And there is a good argument to say that it only happened because there weren’t enough of us about and we were just the gang of 4 or 5 who had the commitment and the will to shove it through. I don’t understand this leadership thing, it just happens.”

“As far as leadership is concerned, that is by default, by circumstances. It’s like going into a battle as an army and ending up as leader of the platoon because there is only you and someone else left. It wasn’t planned for, it just happened.”

Someone talked about looking round and thinking:

“There isn’t anybody else...I’m as much responsible as anybody for doing this stuff.”

Another saw herself as an incentive to others:

“If I can do it, anyone can do it.”

There was a sense of leadership being undertaken reluctantly, but irresistibly:

“You might think about leadership in some ways as a kind of calling for some people. People are drawn to a particular leadership challenge and in that sense, there's something about their almost innate pull towards it that engages them. And many of these people are of course mystified by this, it's almost like leadership overcomes them so they weren't expecting it, they're drawn into something and hadn't really planned.”

“I think a lot of people would find themselves drawn to particular leadership challenges, even when it's not even in their interest, even when they're resisting it and would rather be doing something else with their life. Nonetheless, they find themselves pulled back again and again, despite themselves. In many ways, for many people, they’re almost what I would call reluctant leaders. They really don't choose leadership joyfully. It's almost reluctantly and almost like with a gun to their head. But nonetheless when you take up the responsibilities of leadership, there are satisfactions.”

The importance of declaration

There was overwhelming agreement that leadership was about declaring a position and inviting others to join you. You could not exercise leadership covertly – people needed to know what you stood for. It was not about asking people permission to speak or simply representing the views of others following an exercise in reaching consensus:

“You have to have declared clearly what you are trying to do.”

“It's much more like magnets, you know. You take a step forward, you attract people to you and then that gives you the scope to take another step forward. You have to be visible!”

Some viewed highly public leadership as very important:

“Especially the marginalized communities need you to be up front, need you to be identifiable, need you to be willing to be tape recorded, be on the telly, have your name up in lights.”

And this would mean taking flack:

“You've got to take some abuse too if you ask others to take it.”

“If we don't have people that are willing to take some punishment for their views, then we won't have leadership, it's just that simple.”

The very act of declaring a position inevitably creates a counter position and people disagree with the views you represent to them, even if you did not disagree with or attack their views:

“You're not really going to provide leadership unless you can take and offer a sense of direction and purpose. To do that, you obviously will come into conflict with other people's sense of direction and purpose. By becoming in a sense partisan, you can first define yourself, but you also define yourself as not something else in the process.”

“In one way or another, tacitly or explicitly, you are going to be judged more partially. Consequently, because you're asking people to trust your direction, That means a kind of testing that direction by other people.”

Enduring commitment to the vision

The leader's job was to imagine the big picture – see the prize. Their job was to mobilise people around this vision, even when this was difficult:

“Leadership is the ability to make reality of the whole picture for other people. So it's about having a sense of what people want, having a sense of how the system works and then being a bridge between the two.”

“ It's taken me a long time and a lot of pain I think, to realise that actually, I really do see further than most people ... here, and see the bigger picture and if they're acting a certain way, it's not because they see the big picture and they've got a better strategy, it's because they don't see it, so it's realising that it's not obvious to people.”

“I tend to see the bigger picture and work with the bigger picture, which does have its downside.”

There was an endless tension between pragmatism and idealism, between steering the direct route to the vision and taking a diversion to take into account current realities. This can often involve making people uncomfortable, as they have to make new alliances and rethink their strategies.

“People in leadership roles need to reassess their perceptions.”

“I think the main thing underpinning it has to be that sense of a clear set of values and principles. Without that, where is anyone leading anyone? You need to be clear about where roughly you want to go, there may be discussion about different emphasis, and so on, but in general terms you need to be clear about your basic reason for wanting to lead or get involved.”

The commitment to the guiding vision has often to be stronger than the commitment to the individuals travelling with you. Whilst declaration in response to a vision was crucial, being non-aligned was also important at times. One person talked about having to be non-aligned to the separate groups involved in the coalition, but completely focussed on the real prize in order to draw out consensus between the different vested interests he was leading.

“As leader you have to be non-aligned and not act in a partisan way. The authority comes from unquestioned commitment to the vision. Keep an eye on the big picture, survive the “stushies” and sort out the mess afterwards.”

“Not leading a party, but leading an argument.”

Another, when describing the qualities they admired in someone they considered to be a leader said:

“He never influenced decisions, but he won people over in the sense that he created a situation that people were prepared to hear each other, hear different

views, to seek a solution, a way forward out of a potential political mire in fact, a no win situation.... that was what he created.”

The ability to live with dissent

Leading often meant disagreeing, and not being afraid to disagree:

“Conflict and difference is healthy, not destructive.”

One of the key ingredients of all the leaders we spoke with was their personal ability to express dissent. Each person talked about an inner ability to say, “this isn’t good enough”, or “this isn’t fair” or “it doesn’t have to be this way.”

“I think I embody this thing that it doesn’t have to be this way. You know, I just don't accept that the way it is, is the way it has to be.”

The declaration of dissent had to be accompanied with a vision of an alternative and the clarity of this vision often created dissatisfaction with partial gains on the way:

“Real leadership would mean not coming to a lot of those parties. It is one thing to accommodate some of these things, it's another to legitimise them. I think some people need to celebrate - some people just need this. Dissent is to desist from endorsement, that you just to de-authorise a lot of these things.”

Preventing complacency and self-satisfaction in others and themselves was a necessary if uncomfortable requirement of the job:

“One of the things that makes for lack of progress is too much comfort – complacency.”

“People have been saying to me oh it's fine now, isn't it, things have moved on a lot and I'm saying well you might think that, but I don't think that at all, I think there's a huge amount of work to do.”

As one leader put it, exasperatedly, people had

“No concept of their own oppression!”

This dissent impacted on their individual leadership styles, with most accepting that they could be driven and uncompromising:

“I’m quite task focussed, quite bloody minded at times.”

“I hope I am a facilitative and an enabling leader, but there will times when I won’t be and there will be times when I am absolutely definite about what we are doing – so there will time when I will be autocratic.”

“You need to make other people feel uncomfortable.”

This dissent was often internally channelled:

“I have constantly challenged myself about these ideas, and tested them against anyone and everyone I meet. “

One talked about the discomfort of being “the endless critic” and that they had played a role of being a critic within their own movement. They were only sustained by the fact that others listened to their concerns and critiques and found them of use.

One person spoke graphically about being willing to fracture the room – about being aware of the split in the room when you went in one direction and her growing willingness to live with that and accept that.

Others also knew when to lift the pressure:

“I know quite often when to argue and when not to argue, so I’m quite sensitive to people.”

Finally, leaders needed to both be authentic and spot authenticity:

“You have to listen intently for authenticity.”

Personal impact of the leadership role

People were aware that the need to exercise leadership set them apart from other group members and one has developed a keen sense of their marginality to the groups they were part of.

“Yes, it can be lonely and crowded at the same time. It's lonely in terms of who can I really trust to give me a mirror, and it can be crowded in the sense of lots of people making demands.”

Many of the people we talked to personally embodied with the cause they lead. This had particular impact on their well-being. Some talked about emotional “burn-out”, exhaustion or emptiness. There was real danger that:

“You make yourself absolutely empty because you're drawing on yourself all the time.”

“Emotional emptiness is a key danger. We are always pinning our colours to the mast. It takes over your life. You need breaks out of the county, with no phone contact. You go to the cinema so no-one can talk to you!”

“The utter exhaustion at times that I feel of in terms of dealing with the issues, because my issue is a personal issue. as well as being a professional issue. And that's a really exhausting symbiotic relationship that you're getting into. You're using yourself so often.”

“Every now and then I fall apart.”

A number of people talked about taking extreme measures to sustain themselves – leaving the country regularly, not having an answer machine, not giving people your mobile number. Some said this type of personal damage made high level leadership time-limited to between 3-5 years:

“I see myself winding down and I am tired, I think I am coming to a burnt out stage at 42 which is quite frightening frankly, and so I see myself as winding down, and taking much more of a back seat role, supporting - choosing who I'd like to support carefully.”

Many talked about the need for a small group of deeply trusted friends who would give them licence to rant and tolerate their need to off load.

Very few had external independent mentors, although many recognised the benefit of such a support system. One regularly used an independent facilitator who lived in another part of the country to enable them to reflect and learn. The need to express confident leadership in public often made this need for reflection acute:

“If you say you can't do something, the people you are leading feel uncomfortable - but you do need someone that you can say that to other than the cat.”

Leading mission driven organisations or groups of individuals often brought specific challenges:

“I think in a mission driven organisation part of leadership is to keep that mission and the vision alive.”

“The role is about challenging; educating. The very existence of {the organisation} challenges as it is controlled by disabled people.”

“I think people in these sorts of organisations, because they're organisations of dissent, people will naturally resist what they perceive as being managed, as being told what to do. If people worked for an organisation like this and they didn't resist being told what to do, then they're in the wrong organisation.”

“You're dealing with a marginalized community who are dealing with pain and hurt and all the rest of it, you find somewhere safe and they dump it and usually what you find is that it's at the meetings that you're chairing.”

One person talked about “resentment and being angry at not being given the credit” as a key danger of the role. What sustained them was the generosity of spirit of some key people.

Other talked about the precariousness of the role:

“I could easily become persona non-grata, I could just step on too many toes, and it's a balance thing.”

“But I am very conscious that the only authority you have as a leader is the authority that is given to you by the people you are working with and I think sometimes people forget that. You are leading, but you are following. You have to try and communicate a message you have to try and show you are able to make decisions when they are needed and all that stuff, but the bottom line is that you can't take people where they don't want to go. So it is a kind of balance.”

Consciousness of need for different leadership at different times

Many stressed the need for different kinds of leadership at different phases or an organisation or movement's development. The context determined the leadership style required:

“Leadership makes no sense except in the broader context of what provokes it and different moments in history provoke different kinds of leadership challenges.”

Leaders needed to judge when to motivate people when they were losing heart and when to organise a celebration to keep people going. Leaders also needed to judge when to broaden the agenda and when to compress focus. For example, sometimes the movement was capable of fanning out and encapsulating all the big picture issues – social justice and equality. At other times the tail had to contract to a narrow beam that had to focus inwards on very specific interests.

“Like a peacock's tail, sometimes it's fanned out and it's absolutely gorgeous, diverse and glorious, in full colour and sometimes you need it closed and sharp and specific.”

“I'm not very good about defining the boundaries of the movement. I tend to be quite flexible because I think there's an opportunistic element in trying to keep the boundaries as broad as possible; you can contract it in when you need to.”

Some were distrustful of mainstreaming the disability agenda, fearing it would be lost or diluted in the wider equalities debate. Others recognised this fear, but stressed the need to bring the issues together and share them over the long haul:

“The rewards in leadership are much more long term – it's a kind of slow burning thing.”

Succession planning

We asked everyone what they were doing about succession planning. This question provoked both distress and debate. One said they were like “the Banyan Tree, under which nothing grows”. People generally felt that succession planning was important but had mixed views about it’s potential success:

“You won't find the next leader by looking in the mirror and I just think it's impossible for somebody to know who'd be best to replace them because actually all we do know is organisations need a change.”

“I think in that narrow sense, succession planning's probably a mistake. But I think that idea of making sure that the ideas and values which you hold are held in lots of different places in the organisation is important, so that the organisation is resilient.”

“You can’t anoint your successor – you have to leave and let others take up the space. You have to find the right leader for the right phase of the movement’s development.”

Developing leadership

Although few were involved in any systematic leadership development process, everyone agreed that the development of leadership was a good thing:

“My theory about leadership is that we're not at an optimal position in relation to leadership in our society, that if there was more leadership and probably more follower-ship going on, then we'd get more good stuff done.”

People recognised the need for new leadership to challenge established leaders:

“The discipline of being part of authority and power is that it makes people much more tactical and much more strategic and more cautious, but a movement needs to keep breaking ground. I think this is where younger people would help them.”

One of the recurring themes was a belief in the ability of people:

“The key principle is that ordinary people have great qualities.”

“People aren't stupid.”

“Everybody had something to contribute.”

“Its about having expectations of people.”

However, this didn't guarantee leadership potential in everyone:

“You can't turn everyone into leaders but I think some people have huge latent potential which is never tapped.”

“Far more people have that capacity than recognise it. But we shouldn't make the assumption that everyone has that capacity or is best equipped to play that kind of role.”

“While everybody might have some innate leadership capacity... the only leaders that count are the ones that do something.”

People understood leadership development as drawing something out of people, rather than pouring something into them. They talked about “liberating” people's potential:

“Generating leadership capacity is helping people to highlight what they've got inside themselves that they can use, that's theirs, belongs to them.”

“Its about developing people's antenna.”

“I think it's enticing them into those situations with the thought to realise how competent they're capable of being, because once they realise that, they can take the next step.”

In order to exercise leadership, the individual had to take up the role and use his or her own power. They could not be authentically empowered externally.

People were clear that inviting people to undertake leadership was asking a lot:

“When we talk of leadership and so on, we aren’t actually asking people to participate just even on equal terms. We are asking them to do more than that, we are asking them to represent people in what is often a hostile environment. So it is a lot to ask of people.”

Echoing back to the earlier comments about the dangers of being personally embodied by the cause you are leading, one person suggested that the leadership could not only be drawn from the people most affected by the issue:

“It doesn’t matter which revolution you look at, leadership always comes from people who have been able to see further because of the position they’re in which is actually at some distance from the worst of the oppression.”

There was a need for a new kind of leadership to tackle the distinct issues facing the human service system at the present time. One person talked about the relative simplicity of the old battles, where there were clear “goodies” and “baddies”, and the new battles, which were much more sophisticated. There was now an issue over authenticity of values, with everybody spouting values and “values bragging” being commonplace. It was now more complex to see the truth:

“The technocratic culture of service produces a group of people who conform to a technocratic system. We need technocratic dissidents who offer an alternative.”

“The kind of leaders we’ll need will need to be much more depthful and substantive to see through the uselessness of a lot of these things (new fads) and the triviality of them in comparison to other remedies. Getting people to deeply engage the problems that they’re facing at a level of authenticity that really makes a substantial difference.”

“If the task in hand is to keep the ship afloat and the ‘steady as she goes’ type stuff, then that technocratic approach to leadership is not necessarily wrong. If, on the other hand, the task in hand is actually to deliver change, and then I think the approach to leadership has to be more people orientated, more cause driven and more of a risk taking approach.”

People’s strategies for developing leaders included practical suggestions like: set up systems others can follow, bring people on, manoeuvre people into powerful positions, never underestimate the power of people seeing other people doing something, and, teach people more theory:

“There is something about that with a lot of work we do, because it does tend to be people who are marginalized and therefore feeling powerless and... quite vulnerable. In the past I think I haven’t as well been prepared to kind of challenge or offered more... but actually helping people with some theoretical

ideas, - people love this!”

And finally:

“ Go out of the way to be helpful, hospitable. Always give people something to take away, feed them whenever you can, give time to hear them, give space to explore forbidden ideas; tell stories.”