

Network Leadership

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Introduction

The challenges we face, from global warming to inequality and pandemics, flow through interlocking networks of connection and causation, leading to volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (Bennis and Nanus, 1985). Simultaneously, the power of networks is growing. In technology, science and civil society, social networks are becoming a way to uncover the hidden architecture of complexity and unlock people's capacity to think and act in different ways (Christakis and Fowler 2011).

Ferguson (2017) argues that the secret of our success as a species has always resided in our collaborative intelligence. Humans learn socially through teaching and sharing, and perhaps our species should be known as *Homo dicotyous* (network man), because our brains appear to have been built for networks. And today's technologies have us more connected than ever. In the light of networking and collaboration software, managers cannot continue to assume a static, hierarchical model of the firm for the convenience of seeing how to manage it. Now that firms' activities are so intertwined and their success so interdependent old tools and techniques have less efficacy (Straub, 2019).

Traditional models of hierarchical leadership and management are still necessary, but no longer sufficient, and a more contemporary understanding of organisational connection is required, one which sees organisations as shared processes that allow us to harness hierarchies and social networks to achieve our objectives. As Slaughter (2017) observes, however, we do not yet know how to handle this networked world. The network provides a metaphor, not an analytical tool, and we need to understand how to connect for specific purposes.

Initial Findings

Previous experience in the military and as a consultant in the public, private and third sectors led the author to question the rational, hierarchical view of the organisation and see it instead as a social network, with flows of information and connection that cut across and between conventional organisational charts. This led to the term 'network leaders', those leaders who know that opportunities and threats do not come neatly parcelled to fit within the hierarchical structure of teams and departments into which we have organised ourselves and can see across organisations to make the sum of the parts greater than the whole.

Investigation, conducted by literature review, alongside observation and interviews with colleagues and clients, led to a book, co-authored with a former colleague (Peckham and Whitehead forthcoming), the purpose of which was to explore 'network leadership' and define the skills and characteristics required of network leaders, which led to the identification of four key practices:

1. **Understanding Social Systems.** An understanding of networks helps identify cliques, silos and gaps in connectivity, which, when dealt with effectively, can improve productivity and responsiveness, smooth channels of communication, and spur change and innovation.
2. **Convening Power.** An attractive power based on values, ideas, and an ability to make sense of things. Fundamentally, it is about having something to say worth listening to and a personal manifesto that draws people to them.
3. **Leading Beyond Authority.** An ability to work across boundaries, connecting ideas with action, and people with resources. Unlike conventional top-down leadership, this is less about formal and positional authority and more about personal influence.
4. **Restless Persuasion.** It is an approach that is always open to possibility and opportunity: reforming networks and ideas as projects unfold and reconfiguring to deliver but remaining true to core values and beliefs. And that requires resilience, a capacity to be comfortable in chaos and a certain unreasonableness.

Future Research

A justifiable criticism of the book is its potential bias, in that it draws extensively on the experiences of the two authors and as such is based on a persona reflective lens rather than objective, systematic research. That said, the views of clients and colleagues have been sought to ensure an element of face validity (Gravetter et al, 2012), and the contract with Routledge suggests the same. However, following Anderson, Herriot and Hodgkinson's (2001) four-fold characterization of applied social science, the work might be deemed 'Popularist [Social] Science' - high on relevance but low on academic rigour. The aim moving forward, therefore, is to provide 'Pragmatic [Social] Science', balancing both rigour and relevance. Thus, as part of the planned approach to develop the subject field of network leadership, it is intended that a more thorough and in-depth literature review is undertaken. This will inform a systematic identification of research questions, which will in turn lead to a well-grounded research design to investigate the four key practices identified above.

Conclusion

Network leadership facilitates the exchange of information about who does what, who knows what, and who needs what, to better understand organisational effectiveness as the shift away from traditional models of hierarchy continues. Based on the four key practices of leadership identified in this paper it is planned to use these as the basis for developing further exploratory research that provides a robust evidence base to evaluate and critically challenge network leadership.

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