



Clare **Social**
Leadership

Talking leadership



A report of qualitative research into
leadership development in the social sector
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Leadership development in the social sector

1. Introduction

Nationally and globally we face unprecedented challenges and a changing social and political landscape. The rise of populism, Brexit and climate change all pose questions that require thoughtful responses from social sector organisations. As the recent Civil Society Futures report¹ made clear, the social sector has a vital role in finding common ground in an increasingly divided society and helping to navigate these challenges to create better outcomes.

This report sets out findings from qualitative research into leadership development in our sector conducted with over 50 CEOs and senior leaders from charities and other organisations. We heard widespread agreement that effective leadership development is essential for creating the capabilities and relationships needed to address complex issues. Our conversations highlighted a commitment to leadership development and a belief it should be available to everyone – not just ‘elites’.

At the same time, there was a strong sense that the sector does not engage consistently in the leadership development it needs. Clore Social Leadership’s 2016 research identified three principal barriers to leadership development: **cost**, **time** and **confusion**. Our conversations this time confirmed the significance of these and provided deeper insight into the confusion and challenges that exist around leadership development. Respondents identified uncertainty about: the meaning of leadership and leadership development; the benefit and value of it; what opportunities exist; what is most appropriate; and how to access it. In addition, responsibility for leadership development sits across a diverse groups of stakeholders and there is no shared understanding of what their respective roles are.

The interviews surfaced a **wealth of unharnessed potential for leadership development within the sector** (e.g. secondments, shadowing, mentoring) and appetite to explore ways of unleashing it. Parallel to that, a number of interviewees also talked about leadership that is generous, open and works beyond organisational boundaries to serve their broader mission. This more collaborative leadership mindset is essential for the sector to harness the untapped potential that exists.

This report draws upon 58 qualitative interviews with CEOs and senior leaders from a diverse group of social sector, universities and private sector organisations²; 19 survey responses and a small focus group with Clore Social Fellows. Respondents were generous with their time and provided rich and thoughtful insights. It has not been possible to reflect all of their wisdom in this report. We want to give our thanks for the time they gave to us. In what follows, we draw out the key messages about leadership and leadership development that emerged for us through these interviews.

¹ <https://civilsocietyfutures.shorthandstories.com/the-story-of-our-future/index.html>

² Please see Appendix A for a full list of interviewees

2. Key messages

The complexity of challenges facing the sector and the need for new ways of thinking about and practicing leadership is now a well-rehearsed narrative. However, in spite of the familiarity of these challenges, our workforce is not consistently accessing and engaging with the opportunities to develop the leadership capabilities and relationships necessary to tackle them.

Cost, time and confusion are holding the sector back from creating the leadership it needs. There is significant **confusion** about leadership and leadership development. Public perceptions of leadership remain associated with status, hierarchy and 'heroism.' The image of the heroic leader, often associated with masculinity, circulates powerfully, reinforcing a sense that leadership and leadership development are elitist and only for certain people. This serves to prevent many social leaders from associating positively with leadership.

Leadership development is largely perceived to be reward focused, disconnected from the work of delivering for beneficiaries, and a luxury. The benefits and value of leadership development are poorly understood and articulated, particularly for organisations or their beneficiaries. Leadership development is not consistently approached as a set of strategies for personal and collective impact. Inconsistent and infrequent dialogue about leadership development in organisations make it difficult for individuals to understand their needs, what opportunities exist, or how to access them. This contributes to low demand for leadership development and discourages funders from supporting it.

Leaders face **cost** and **time** barriers to leadership development. New funding models, the UK's austerity programme, greater competition for resources and low prioritisation of leadership development in grants contribute to significant financial limitations. And in a context of increasing demand for services, leaders often struggle to make the time for leadership development. Leadership development provision is largely perceived to be expensive given constraints on operating budgets. Accessing a potentially bewildering range of programmes, especially for organisations outside major urban areas, is also particularly challenging.

Despite this context of uncertainty and scarcity, our conversations highlighted examples of effective leadership development taking place across the sector. We heard from senior leaders working resourcefully to develop the leadership of their teams. In many cases this involved harnessing inexpensive and/or free options for leadership development, such as peer learning and mentoring. The leaders we spoke to made strong pleas for more accessible leadership development for their teams, and for the sector more widely.

A striking and important insight arose from our conversations and is the key learning emerging from this research: **there is an abundance of untapped potential for leadership development within the sector**. We heard about: desire to create opportunities to learn from others through peer-to-peer learning, shadowing and secondments; interest and capacity for mentoring, within and across sectors; day-to-day activities and interactions that present

unrealised opportunities for dialogue, learning and action on leadership. Many leaders spoke powerfully of their own journeys and awakenings, achieved through being with other inspiring leaders.

Alongside this, a number of interviewees articulated a more collaborative leadership mindset and approach that seeks to be generous, open and works beyond organisational boundaries to serve their broader mission. For the sector to harness the untapped potential that exists, leadership is needed that is more open to dialogue about development and learning and generous in exchanging and connecting with those in other organisations and sectors.

The message of abundance is not an easy one to communicate for a sector that is so used to thinking about leadership development through the lens of scarcity. Nonetheless, its emergence is an exciting opportunity to stimulate a conversation about how we as a sector think and work differently to support leadership development.

Individuals and their organisations can only do so much of the work to harness this untapped potential on their own. What is urgently needed is a generous and smart exchange mechanism, in which social sector leaders can participate and support leadership development.

3. Social sector leadership

As part of our efforts to understand leadership development needs, we were interested in what distinctions, if any, social sector leaders saw between leadership in this sector and other sectors. Responses were on a spectrum, with most conversations highlighting differences of emphasis, rather than presenting a binary position.

Those comments that emphasised something distinctive about social sector leadership tended to focus upon the contextual and organisational factors faced by its leaders and not experienced by those operating in other sectors. These included: the management and motivation of volunteers; the complexities of engaging and mobilising a wide and varied range of stakeholders from Trustees and staff, to service beneficiaries and the public; the dual bottom lines of impact and financial rigour; the emotional challenges of working with those most in need; greater emphasis on values and vision; and staff who may also be service beneficiaries.

“Social leadership is about ‘the kinds of people we have to lead. People who are values driven, who want to make the world a better place’.”

“Good leadership is good leadership. However, the two distinctive pieces about our sector are the values driven work and the governance,” says Sara Llewellyn. *“The other is the relationship with beneficiaries – being ‘of’ [and ‘with’] your beneficiaries rather than ‘doing to’ them,”* adds Debbie Pippard. An important aspect of social sector leadership are motivations, as Rosie Ferguson observed, *“changing the world is our job.”* Social leadership is about “the kinds of

people we have to lead. People who are values driven, who want to make the world a better place,” says Moira Sinclair.

These factors, some interviewees argue, mean that the emotional intelligence required by social sector leaders is greater than in other sectors. This places particular importance on supporting leaders to develop capabilities around self-awareness and reflection. This view is best summed up by Julia Unwin: *“We need more skills for understanding people, more emotional intelligence. We never talk about emotions in how we make decisions, how we understand the people we work with.”*

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Others took the view that whilst there may be some contextual differences and specific challenges, it does not make sense to talk about the sector as a unique place. Some respondents queried whether it is even the right question: *“I see more similarities than differences; sometimes it’s a false distinction,”* says Craig Dearden-Phillips.

The social sector itself is hugely varied, and very large NGOs may have more in common with a business than with a small, local charity. *“Should we be making the comparison between sectors or should we be making the comparison between sizes of organisation?”* asks Marie Mohan. Matt Leach expounds further: *“[There’s] lots of diversity of types of organisation grouped under the ‘social purpose’ umbrella: Trusts & Foundations; social enterprises/social businesses; community-led organisations/community associations. Better segmentation is needed within and between these organisations and contexts when talking about ‘social sector leadership’ as they can require very different leadership approaches.”*

The boundaries are therefore increasingly blurred between sectors. For example, many charities deliver public sector contracts. *“Much of our management and leadership skill has become about contract management,”* Matthew Reed confirms. Increasing numbers of private sector organisations put social responsibility at the heart of their business; and the explosion in social enterprises has altered the traditional boundaries. Whilst increasingly the social sector is looking to develop collaboration and partnerships, charities and NGOs are also competing for profile, influence, brand recognition, income and credibility – even mergers.

Dominic Houlder argues: *“Sometimes the differences are exaggerated. In the social sector, the people working for you as their leader are motivated by saving the world. In the commercial sector, they’re motivated by making money, there’s a bit more extrinsic motivation you can work with. Sometimes in the third sector, we don’t like to use that language but actually our organisations are competing for funds, share of mind, for talent etc. so that’s an area of commonality that sometimes gets masked – our behaviour may be more red in tooth and claw in the third sector than we claim.”*

A number of respondents pointed out there often exists an implicit assumption that an organisation’s mission is somehow enough in itself – what some call the ‘halo effect’; if an

organisation is a not-for-profit it is by definition a good organisation and the staff will be effective and responsible simply as a result of their virtue. This is an aspect of leadership and social sector culture that is not found in other sectors. As Adam Grodecki observes: *“Social sector staff often assume that responsibility comes from the mission itself – ethical leadership development is only for those in others sectors (e.g. corporates) – which means people feel in less need of development and this [attitude] needs to move.”* Richard Harries concurs: *“Motivation (i.e. social purpose) is often articulated, but is often more about virtue signalling.”* As does Matt Leach, *“perhaps ‘the social sector’ [term] is problematic in itself – for example large not-for-profit service delivery organisations can present leadership challenges that have far more in common with those facing private sector firms than small community-facing start-ups. Sometimes the grasping for a common social ‘halo effect’ gets in the way of acknowledging this.”* Marie Mohan adds, *“stereotypes of being ‘angels’ can often come to the fore when talking about how the social sector is different – we are not angels. These myths have become more predominant over the recent past and can contribute to cynicism towards other sectors and the good they also do.”*

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Within the range of responses to this question, there was strong consensus that the growing challenges the social sector faces, in all its diversity, requires a greater emphasis on leadership development than exists at present.

4. Leadership needs in the social sector

Interviewees identified a broad range of competencies that they felt were not sufficiently exhibited by social sector leaders at present and needed to be a focus of future development efforts.

Social sector leaders have to navigate an increasingly complex set of challenges and do it in ways that engage diverse groups of stakeholders in social change efforts. Intervening in challenging social problems requires an ability to work with others to understand and communicate complexity in simple ways and to take meaningful action. As Tom Rippin observes in talking about developing a capacity for systems thinking, *“being able to switch into that different way of thinking is something that needs practising e.g. thinking about root causes, not just tackling symptoms of issues.”*

Intervening in complex contexts also requires an ability to understand one’s own role in both the challenges that exist and how one can contribute to creating meaningful change. Social leaders and their organisations need the capacity and time to reflect upon their own strengths and weaknesses to enable them to identify where and how they can best enable change. This requires a greater focus on self-reflection and deeper understanding of our individual and collective roles in developing, creating and sustaining change. As Maria Adebawale-Schwarte observes: *“Leadership is about better understanding yourself and your role in creating change.”*

At a time of unprecedented change, future gazing – and envisaging what those changes might mean individually, organisationally and sectorally – is essential to creating a better tomorrow. Opportunities and capabilities to imagine new future possibilities, individually and collectively, are seriously limited for a sector under diverse pressures to deliver. As Moira Sinclair observes, *“foresight is a skill lacking in our sector – the skill and time to look to the horizon, interpret context,”* while Dawn Austwick points out: *“Innovation and collaboration are key responsibilities for our leaders but they do not today have these skills. They need to imagine and shape a new future.”*

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Some respondents expressed concerns that leadership in the social sector is not sufficiently able to respond to the challenges of the future. This view was summed up by Danny Kruger when he says, *“many voluntary sector leaders are unable to keep up with the pace of change, let alone able to change and adapt.”*

Critical to the ability of the social sector to create a better future is the development of the next generation of leaders. This requires the ability to foster and develop talent from a diverse group of leaders, who are more representative of the communities served by organisations than is the case right now. The present moment provides *“a real opportunity for tailored support for those who do not fit the ‘norm’ of what a leader used to be. It’s still a sector that has quite traditional ways of thinking and understanding,”* says Vicky Browning. Diversity in leadership includes recognizing and supporting the leadership potential of those with lived experience of disadvantage. Doing this meaningfully will require changes to traditional hierarchies, a shifting of mindsets and power dynamics, and new ways of working. As Baljeet Sandhu reflects, *“we need to get better at celebrating the leadership in and of the communities that we serve.”*

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Essential to developing future leaders is a coherent understanding of what we understand by leadership and how it can support social change. This is something that most social sector organisations struggle to make time and space for. As Amanda Timberg observes, *“oftentimes charities have limited capacity to put together an explicit framework for leadership – so that makes it very difficult to support leaders’ development in line with the charity’s values. There’s no clear understanding of what they want their leaders to do or how they want them to act. A framework with agreed attributes [and competencies] would help make it more tangible and equitable.”* The sector, and its leaders, as Mike Adamson confirms, need, *“an articulation of what good leadership looks like and examples of why it is important.”* Such an articulation would support opportunities for collaboration between organisations by providing a shared set of expectations about how to work.

In all the talk of leadership, many of the interviewees stressed the importance of good management skills. There was a feeling that basic management skills are often neglected in the focus on leadership and getting things done. *“A good leader is somebody who has*

significant management experience, knowledge and skills and adds to that a level of self-knowledge and awareness,” suggests Polly Neate. Managing budgets, people and planning were all emphasised as areas that need focus. Ensuring that leaders have specific management skills alongside developing leadership specific capabilities is critical for social sector leaders who often work in an operational as well as strategic context. As Russell Hobby observes, *“line and relational management, project management and financial management skills are all key – along with a level of digital fluency and social understanding.”*

Effective leadership development works best when participants approach it with curiosity, a desire to learn and a willingness to make changes to established patterns of behaviour. The sector needs those who are *“curious and want to be a better version of themselves. People have to want to be leaders,”* as Mike Adamson suggests.

5. Effective leadership development and its benefits

Interviewees identified a range of benefits for individuals, organisations and the wider sector from leadership development. Our conversations highlighted a consensus that investment in leadership development helps individuals and collectives deliver better outcomes with – and for – beneficiaries and communities. As Matt Hyde powerfully puts it, *“leadership development is about creating the conditions to help others to thrive.”* Interviewees spoke particularly strongly about the benefits of learning from others working different contexts, through routes such as mentoring, secondments, shadowing, and placements.

Whilst all interviewees talked about the benefits of leadership development, there was also agreement that the benefits and value to the individual, and particularly to their organisations and the wider sector, are currently not well understood or communicated.

Concerns were also expressed about the limitations of approaches to leadership development that lean too heavily on ‘taking people out’ of their contexts and that provide insufficient support to create sustainable change in existing roles. Those who have engaged with external leadership development opportunities often find the return to existing roles hard, particularly after a transformational experience.

We also heard that it is not uncommon for individuals to leave and take up new roles following a leadership development opportunity. This may be challenging for the organisations which invested in them. As Dawn Austwick says, *“many Boards feel they cannot spare their managers to go on training and worry that leaders will leave and that succession becomes a problem.”* We heard, however, that this can be also be strength as individuals find places in which they can use their developing capabilities to their – and the sector’s – best advantage.

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Leadership development interventions, particularly external programmes, therefore *“need to be embedded into organisational practice,”* argues Baljeet Sandhu. Approaches to leadership development also need to enable people to understand, navigate and intervene in a diverse

range of contexts simultaneously. As Richard Harries observes, “*effective leadership development is about the right time in their journey and the right point for their organisation and sector – personal development needs to be conditioned by all three.*” Further work on leadership development should respond to these multi-dimensional aspects of context.

Individual benefits

At an individual level our conversations highlighted several benefits of leadership development:

- Understanding how to consciously build strong internal relationships – “*One has to understand how your part relates to everybody else. Too many people focus on doing their part well without seeing the interdependencies – an ability to work with, and lead, people, who are different from yourself.*” (Marie Mohan)
- Managing complex stakeholder dynamics – “*The stakeholder environment is more complex so we have to be balancing a lot of intangibles.*” (Russell Hobby)
- New perspectives and inspiration – “*[Leadership development] brings you different perspectives and the time to reflect.*” (Vicky Browning)
- Increased confidence – “*The benefits of leadership development are confidence, clarity and collegiality.*” (Moira Sinclair)
- Better decision making and role performance – “*Being ok with making unpopular decisions and linking decisions back to the ‘why’ is critical, whether it is to drive change or part of business as usual, leadership support can help with that*” (Carole Harder)
- Fostering a diversity of thinking and approaches – “*people build their confidence; build their networks; build their ability to collaborate...ability to support others...becoming familiar with different ways of working...*” (Jane Tarr)
- Greater self-awareness – “*Enabling autonomy and support to be their best selves.*” (Emma Revie)

Organisational benefits

Where leadership development is connected to a broader organisational context, it can contribute to a greater focus on the mission, values and culture of an organisation and help develop a sense of collective endeavour and purpose. This supports the conditions for long-term organisational success with a greater focus on the future, where creativity can thrive, assumptions can be safely challenged and where risks are managed in more sophisticated ways. It provides opportunities to bring in new ideas, tools and practices that can enhance an organisation’s ability to deliver its goals. “*Both the individual and the organisation should be getting development simultaneously,*” argues Richard Harries. For this to be truly realised, as Adam Grodecki argues, “*Leadership development needs to move from being seen as talent development to organisational development [providing ways of] harnessing existing energies better or by stopping people doing bad things. However, this requires some fundamental re-working of how leadership development is approached, measured and supported.*”

Specific benefits can include:

- Better ability to improve outcomes for and with beneficiaries – *“It enables organisations to focus upon their beneficiaries. It’s about strong leadership in the service of beneficiaries.”* (Andy Hillier)
- Agility and responding to a changing external environment – *“Leadership development is about understanding self, behaviours, people, context – dealing with the challenge of bringing it all together and enabling people to respond to that analytically and with agility.”* (Hilary Carty)
- Encouraging new ideas and approaches to surface – *“If we framed it as we’re all going to learn together and share our ideas [as] collective leaders, people do buy-in to that.”* (Anna Fowlie)
- Greater staff and volunteer morale and retention – *“It can be a really good way to knit the organisation together...cohesion, retention, team happiness, better relationships and better understanding of each other... unlocking new ideas...increasing personal motivation...”* (Tom Rippin)
- Helping teams to work effectively – *“Surfacing tensions and enabling leaders to draw on a wider range of capabilities can allow for a more collective and distributed approach to leadership. This is an important part of establishing a good organisational culture which draws on and maximises individual and collective contributions.”* (Lisa Weeks and David Naylor)

Sectoral benefits

We heard that a greater focus upon leadership development is critical for the wider social sector to address challenges that can only be tackled through genuine and deep collaboration. Nurturing collaborative leadership within the sector is a critical part of addressing these complex issues. Leadership development can provide opportunities to build relationships and networks beyond organisations as well as specific support to cross-organisational groups to identify problems, design solutions and experimentally test their effectiveness.

This leadership is also vital to harnessing cross-organisational appetite for mentoring, shadowing and secondments. *“We need to create a culture in the charity sector that is less about growing your existing organisation and more about thinking about the potential impact,”* argues Andy Hillier. *“The leaders of the sector have to work collectively. Too much of our management and leadership skill has become about contract management rather than about building a collaborative sector. So, we are teaching leaders a skill set which is technical and inwardly focused rather than advocacy-based and externally focused,”* adds Matthew Reed.

Developing this collaborative leadership, interviewees said, was challenging in a context in which, without the space and time afforded by leadership development opportunities, it is exceptionally difficult for leaders to focus beyond their own organisation. This is exacerbated by the strong imperatives of existing accountability structures, creating a tension between mission and organisational form, which leaders need to navigate.

Interviewees were open about the challenges that developing this more collaborative approach to leadership involves. Some suggested that the challenge is to manage the relationship between differing aspects of leadership. As Carol Jacklin-Jarvis argues, *“there’s a tension [between] collaborative forms of leadership development and those focusing on the individual. It’s important to hold the tension between individual and collective, individual growth to enable collective growth and impact.”* Matthew Reed opines: *“Social sector leaders more than anything need to role model the kind of society we want to be. That is our responsibility. We have to show what it means to be human. And we must encourage our people (staff and volunteers) to bring to work all that they are. That is what will make the public love and trust the social sector.”*

6. What leaders value about leadership development?

During our conversations we explored interviewees’ views about what is important to them in leadership development. They highlighted six key areas:

1. Focus on skills and self-awareness

Leadership development inputs tend to focus upon either the development of skills and knowledge acquisition or upon greater self-awareness and understanding of others’ motivations. We heard concerns that there is an over-emphasis on skills-based approaches to leadership development and an under-appreciation of the importance of self and other-awareness and harnessing that to support change.

Polly Neate describes it thus: *“Leadership development means a development of deeper and more sophisticated self-knowledge and the ability to respond to that.”* And as Anna Fowlie observes, *“it’s about how you develop as a human being. We tend to invest in knowledge in ‘the thing’, rather than the skills and qualities needed to do the thing.”* Of course, the sector needs both approaches as Dawn Austwick suggests, *“the best social leaders have a very finely honed set of skills, equally about hard strategic skills and emotional intelligence.”*

2. The value of putting theory into practice, on the job

Leadership development needs to support an ongoing dialogue between theory and practice. Indeed, as Emma Revie argues, *“whole development programmes should include dialogue.”* This means ensuring people have the time and space to reflect on their approach and to make sense of their work through theoretical frameworks.

At the same time, it is important to ensure that ample practical opportunities exist to experiment with new ways of doing things. This means dedicated time and space, supported within their organisational contexts, for engaging in new practice(s) and reflection to support deeper learning and behaviour change. *“I see leadership development as an inherently practical thing, a mixture of experience and theory – the latter illuminates your practice and helps you make sense of the problems that you face,”* says Russell Hobby.

3. Cost-effective

We heard that leadership development is not all about expensive, residential courses: *“Leadership development is seen as cost rather than an investment. There’s a perception [it]*

has to be expensive but we need to shine a light on what is out there, like peer learning or shadowing," says Luke McCarthy. Cheap and free opportunities exist for everyone in the sector and are a vital way of democratising leadership development. These include high quality conversations with colleagues; support from mentors within our organisations and beyond; structured learning exchanges (including action-learning sets); wider reading; exposure to great examples of leadership; shadowing and secondments: *"We feel very strongly about the value of peer-learning particularly because it's grounded in the real world,"* says Ros Oakley. *"Mentoring and coaching can be very powerful,"* says Russell Hobby.

4. Leadership is for everyone

Interviewees felt strongly that leadership development is for everyone, not just those in traditionally hierarchical positions of power. *"Leadership is not about whether you end up being the CEO of something – there are lots of other ways in which people in organisations, in public life, can show leadership. What does leadership development look like for people that are working on the front-line in organisations where they're not very senior?"* asks Sara Llewellyn.

There was a general sense that too little emphasis is currently placed on supporting those in less senior positions or from less well represented communities, and that hierarchical notions of leadership can often be alienating for those who might otherwise benefit.

5. 'You don't know what you don't know'

This relates to the importance of being supported to recognise our own blind spots and weaknesses. Several interviews reflected on the importance of recognising that 'you don't know what you don't know.' Structured opportunities to learn from peers in other roles or contexts (including mentoring, secondments and shadowing) was mentioned regularly and provide ways to identify gaps, experiment with specific strategies for improvement and provide impetus for self-reflection and deeper listening.

6. Long-term focus

Interviewees were unified in their understanding that leadership development entails a long-term approach which supports leaders to enable others to develop. *"A lot of leadership development is driven by fire-fighting pressures, [it's] crisis-based learning,"* Debbie Pippard observes. Adherents of more self-reflective approaches see leadership as being an on-going and open process of action and reflection that creates the conditions in which people thrive and argue that leadership development should more often reflect this.

As Richard Harries observes, *"you are always an emerging leader."* This is a point reinforced by Moira Sinclair, who stresses that, *"probably the most important skill to learn is reflection."*

7. Barriers to leadership development

As referenced in the introduction, our 2016 research identified three principal barriers to leadership development: cost, time and confusion. Our conversations this time confirmed the significance of these challenges and provided us with opportunities to dig deeper into each,

particularly confusion. Below we expand in more detail about what emerged from these discussions.

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There is significant confusion about leadership and leadership development within the sector, and a diversity of views and perspectives about it. A consistent theme in our conversations was that dominant perceptions of leadership continue to focus on the 2H's of 'hierarchy and heroism.' As Sarah Atkinson notes: *“Hero-leadership is still the default, but increasingly we are learning there are other ways to lead.”* For a sector that often feels threatened and insecure on a number of fronts, the normal position for many senior leaders is to feel defensive about the work of their organisation, inhibiting the development of more generous leadership behaviours.

This contributes, as Dan Francis articulated *“to a ‘command and control’ style of leadership that inhibits investment in leadership development.”* This makes introspection more difficult and is increasingly problematic in a complex environment, where deep listening, generosity and creating shared understanding are increasingly important. *“If we are to survive and thrive we need a new generation of generous and adaptive leaders,”* Dawn Austwick observes.

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This emphasis on the 'hero' and their skills and capabilities creates a strong sense of *“leadership...associated with elitism, imposition, private sector practices,”* argues Carol Jacklin-Jarvis. Coupled with this, the language of leadership is often abstract and not articulated in everyday language, making it difficult to access. The language *“does not resonate with those more focused on social impact and collective endeavour – so they are put off seeing themselves as leaders, asking for it, or investing it in themselves.”* (Clore Social Fellows). As a result, many people who are involved in the practices of leadership every day do not associate themselves with leadership or leadership development.

“Leadership development is seen as a reward for good service or used as a retention strategy for those an organisation fears losing,” as Sara Llewellyn observes. Such treatment detracts from possibilities of understanding, talking about and practising leadership development as an everyday activity linked to personal and organisational improvement. As Richard Harries observes, treating leadership development as a reward, *“sits in tension with aspirations of organisational and sector improvement.”*

Unfortunately, for many in the sector this results in a lack of meaningful dialogue about leadership development making it difficult to understand their own needs, what opportunities exist or how to engage with it in their day-to-day work. Many opportunities for development within organisations are therefore missed and go unharnessed whilst, *“there is insufficient resource available to support matching and finding for external mentoring, secondments and shadowing,”* argues Polly Neate.

In terms of external leadership development provision, there are multiple providers, offering different takes on leadership development, with a diverse set of approaches, inputs, costs and locations. The plethora of leadership development offers makes it difficult to determine what might be the best approach for an individual or organisation. As Peter Holbrook observes, *“it’s hard to navigate what’s out there in terms of offers, there’s a huge variation in price and quality – you have to be very discerning not to waste money and time.”*

Whilst all our interviewees agreed that leadership development has many benefits, there was also a strong sense that these are not well identified and communicated. Randall Peterson makes the point that, *“the value proposition needs to be clear and explicit. We need to articulate the benefits of leadership development in several ways...for the beneficiaries; wider sector; financial gain.”* Provision remains insufficiently focused on identifying and communicating the tangible impact its participants make in their organisations and contexts, unlike in the education sector for example.

This all contributes to a sense of leadership development *“not being relevant to people’s roles and organisations and being understood largely as an activity for personal gain,”* (Clare Social Fellows) and therefore, being seen as a cost rather than an investment. In turn, this reinforces ideas that asking for or accessing leadership development may be seen as selfish, which may provide disincentives for potential funders. Such disincentives are ones that our interviewees felt funders should be working to overcome. As Emma Revie argues, *“funders could encourage organisations to invest more and build leadership development into business plans.”*

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As several of our interviewees identified, these uncertainties present real challenges for Chief Executives/Directors when making the case for leadership development to their Boards. Moira Sinclair observes that, *“a problem is getting Boards to understand that they need a sophisticated skill set (foresight, service design, system change, human management) but they are not prepared to invest in the individuals.”* These difficulties are reinforced by attitudes both within and without the social purpose sector about investing in service delivery without regard for enabling features, such as the quality of leadership. As Andy Hillier reflects, *“there is an argument that charitable money should only be spent on the front-line and anything else is wasteful. But investing in leadership is vital. If you don’t invest, you run the risk of your leaders being ill prepared for the realities of the role – and your organisation being stuck in the past and not ready for the future.”* As a result, *“every Chief Executive who wants to spend money on leadership development has to really battle for it,”* argues Sir Stephen Bubb.

“But investing in leadership is vital. If you don’t invest, you run the risk of your leaders being ill prepared for the realities of the role – and your organisation being stuck in the past and not ready for the future.”

With a lack of clarity about value and benefit, and in a context of ongoing financial challenges, leaders face cost and time barriers to leadership development. The financial and time pressures that the social purpose sector experiences are genuine and deeply challenging. This is particularly the case for those smaller service delivery organisations. For many, the focus on survival and meeting immediate need make it difficult to pause, make space and take a strategic approach to leadership development.

Importantly, for these organisations, *“it’s usually about time and money, however, if you have the time but not the budget, there is a lot you can do even within your own organisation. Ultimately, you might want or need to work with professionals, which will cost money, but you can do a lot with the right mindset and taking advantage of opportunities for learning that present themselves for free,”* argues Tom Rippin. As Dawn Austwick identifies, *“it’s important that leaders realise that they do not have to go on an expensive programme to develop themselves. Self-help should be an important philosophy to promote.”* For individuals and organisations able to make the time and space to think about leadership development, a variety of low and zero cost options exist: from reading and 1-2-1s, to mentoring and online learning courses. Whilst for those organisations struggling for both time and money, collaborative learning and planning activities can help to harness scarce time resources in new ways through utilising group work to accelerate progress on shared objectives. For some, the pressures of time and money limit capacities for thinking strategically about leadership development. As Sir Stephen Bubb observes, *“there is a lack of a strategic and creative approach to leadership development – too much of ‘we cannot afford to send you on a course so we won’t do it.’”*

“There is a lack of a strategic and creative approach to leadership development – too much of ‘we cannot afford to send you on a course so we won’t do it’.”

None of this takes away from the very real challenges that many organisations face in terms of prioritising the time and money to invest in leadership development in the face of so many other pressures to deliver. External leadership development provision remains expensive given the budgets, while access to leadership development programmes, particularly for organisations outside of major urban areas, is exceptionally challenging.

With so much confusion about leadership and leadership development, and with individuals and organisations under challenging time and financial pressures, the sector is not investing in the leadership development that it needs and deserves. The response to this requires concerted action by all stakeholders to create better leadership. In the final section, we offer some observations and outline opportunities emerging from the interviews for how different stakeholders could better support leadership development.

8. Observations and Opportunities

The leaders we spoke to stressed the need for greater individual and collective responsibility for leadership development, highlighting a wealth of untapped potential within the sector. At

the same time, individuals and their organisations can only do so much of the work to harness this untapped potential on their own. There is a need for thinking about how to strategically harness this potential at a system-level.

Interviewees also identified other opportunities to improve leadership development, and we provide a summary of these below:

All stakeholders

Our respondents were consistent in their belief that leadership development is for everyone. Our daily work, however busy it is, provides rich opportunities for experimental activity to improve our leadership and that of others. The importance of self-investment in leadership development cannot be overstressed.

We all therefore have a role to play in developing leadership, of ourselves, and others. This could include: conversations with colleagues; engaging with leadership materials; experimenting with new leadership behaviours; observing leadership in practices; reflecting on behaviour change etc. None of these cost money but need to be approached with a learning mindset.

Organisational leadership

Our discussions explored a number of organisations doing great work to develop leadership. They identified a general consensus that not enough is being done within organisations to support leadership development. This is a particular challenge for smaller organisations that are under significant time and resource pressures. Organisations outside of major urban areas particularly struggle, given the geographic focus of much external leadership development.

Leadership should be nurtured and fostered at all levels to reflect an inclusive and shared organisational culture, to facilitate longer-term succession planning and to improve outcomes. Organisations are rich in untapped potential for leadership development and senior leaders and Trustees have particular roles in creating the conditions for this potential to be unleashed.

Opportunities for harnessing potential include: explicitly developing a leadership framework; encouraging 1-2-1 and collective conversations about leadership; mentoring and coaching; reflection; external exchanges; and collaborative planning.

Funders

All our respondents told us there was a need for greater resource to support leadership development, and that funders have a vital role to play. Models such as Funder Plus provide promising and exciting examples of how leadership development can be supported. A number of opportunities exist for funders to make a difference through their work. This could come in the form of resources to support leadership development as part of regular grant giving; grants to support the provision of high-quality external leadership programmes; leveraging their own untapped potential providing coaching and mentoring support; more

strategic approaches to capacity building (e.g. brokerage or a digital platform); or championing publicly the importance of leadership development.

Interviewees generally stressed that all stakeholders (Government, Trusts, organisations, individuals themselves) have a role to play in financing leadership development.

Providers

External leadership development providers can make important contributions to enhancing leadership development. This includes better harnessing evidence to inform the design of interventions and better demonstrating the benefits of leadership development to individuals, organisations, the sector and our communities.

More collaborative work between providers would provide ways to better harness existing resources to enhance quality, drive down cost, signpost for support and eliminate confusion.

System-wide

Our conversations also surfaced a number of opportunities that are best thought of in terms of system-wide opportunities. They are beyond the scope of any one stakeholder working in isolation and would require alternative approaches to explore properly.

These opportunities were: the creation of a shared language and framework for social leadership; accreditation and continuous development pathways; identifying and communicating the benefits of leadership development, including success stories of the impact of leadership development; a brokerage system helping individuals and organisations create and navigate opportunities; scoping and testing innovations, particularly in terms of reducing costs; digital provision; and other ways of harnessing untapped potential.

9. Next steps

There is much work to be done and many challenges ahead to enable us to create the leadership development we need.

We are excited by the idea that there is untapped potential for leadership development – and inspired by the willingness of social leaders to be generous and share those resources. There can be no better or empowering way of building the skills of our leaders than by enabling them to exchange and share these skills. But how?

The answers to this question must come from us all and will emerge in unexpected places.

Individually, we need to identify where this untapped potential for leadership development exists within ourselves and explore ways that it can be better harnessed.

As a sector, we need to explore new ways of developing leadership within organisations, help individuals to navigate what is on offer, and identify opportunities for them to learn from and share their skills with others.

Authors: Matthew Davis & Miranda Lewis, m2 consultants, with Chris Gurney, Clore Social Leadership.



Next steps for Clore Social:

This report has been about the views of senior and influential leaders on social sector leadership. We at Clore Social have listened intently and are excited about acting on the insights and advice. Accordingly, we will be developing a new 'innovation lab' to design and test solutions, harness untapped potential and work in partnership with the sector. We will share more information later this year.

With many thanks for support to:



Appendix A: List of interviewees

Many thanks to all those who gave up their valuable time to speak to us for this research. We were not able to include quotes from everyone we interviewed, but all comments and insight shared have been so helpful in informing this report.

Mike Adamson; Chief Executive, *The Red Cross*

Maria Adebowale-Schwartz; Executive Director, *Foundation for Future London*

Debra Allcock Tyler; Chief Executive, *The Directory of Social Change*

Sarah Atkinson; Director of Policy, Planning and Communications at *The Charity Commission*

Dawn Austwick; Chief Executive, *The National Lottery Community Fund*

Andrew Barnett; Director, *UK Branch of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation*

Vicky Browning; Chief Executive, *Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO)*

Sir Stephen Bubb; Director, *Charity Futures*, Acting Director, *The Oxford Institute of Charity*

Lucy Caldicott; Founder, *Change Out*

Hilary Carty; Director, *Clare Leadership*

Nancy Chambers; Chair, *South West Development Directors' Forum*

Philippa Charles; Director, *Garfield Weston Foundation*

Sue Cotton; Chief Executive, *Child Action Northwest*

Craig Dearden-Phillips; Founder, *Social Club UK*

Dr Gareth Edwards; Associate Professor of Leadership Development, *University of Bristol*

Rosie Ferguson; Chair of Trustees, *Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO)*

Jenny Field; Deputy Director, *The City Bridge Trust*

Anna Fowlie; Chief Executive, *Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations*

Dan Francis; Lead Consultant, *National Council for Voluntary Organisations*

Adam Grodecki; Founder and Executive Director, *Forward Institute*

Stephen Hale; Chief Executive, *Refugee Action*

Carole Harder; Chief Executive, *The Percy Hedley Foundation*

Steph Harland; Chief Executive, *Age UK*

Richard Harries; Director of the Research Institute, *Power to Change*

Andy Hillier; Editor, *Third Sector*

Russell Hobby; Chief Executive, *Teach First*

Peter Holbrook; Chief Executive, *Social Enterprise UK*

Dominic Houlder; Adjunct Professor of Strategy and Entrepreneurship, *London Business School*

Matt Hyde; Chief Executive, *The Scout Association*

Rachel Hubbard; Partner and Head of Not-for-Profit Practice, *Saxton Bampfylde*

Dr Carol Jacklin-Jarvis; Lecturer in Management in the Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership, *The Open University*

Danny Kruger; Expert Advisor, *Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)*

Matt Leach; Chief Executive, *Local Trust*

Peter Lewis; Chief Executive, *The Institute of Fundraising*

Sara Llewellyn; Chief Executive, *Barrow Cadbury Trust*

Ray Lock; Chief Executive, *Forces in Mind Trust*

Tris Lumley; Director of Innovation and Development, *New Philanthropy Capital*

Luke McCarthy; Investment Director, *Impetus*

Marie Mohan; Chief Executive, *Common Purpose UK*

Dr David Naylor; Senior Consultant, Leadership Development, Leadership and Organisational Development, *The Kings Fund*

Polly Neate; Chief Executive, *Shelter*

Ros Oakley; Chief Executive, *Association of Chairs*

Dr Randall Peterson; Professor and Academic Director of the Leadership Institute, *London Business School*

Debbie Pippard; Director of Programmes, *Barrow Cadbury Trust*

Fiona Rawes; Philanthropy Director, *City of London Corporation*

Matthew Reed; Chief Executive, *Marie Curie*

Dr James Rees; Senior Research Fellow and Director of the Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership, *The Open University*

Emma Revie; Chief Executive, *The Trussell Trust*

Tom Rippin; Founder and Chief Executive, *On Purpose*

Vyla Rollins; Executive Director of the Leadership Institute, *London Business School*

Baljeet Sandhu; Visiting Fellow at the Information Society Project, *Yale Law School*

Moira Sinclair; Chief Executive, *Paul Hamlyn Foundation*

Alex Skales; Senior Academic, Faculty of Management, and Director, Centre for Charity Effectiveness, *Cass Business School, City, University of London*.

Jane Tarr; Director Skills and Workforces; *Arts Council England*

Amanda Timberg; Head of Talent and Outreach Programs, EMEA, *Google*

Julia Unwin; Chair, *Independent Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society*

Lisa Weaks; Assistant Director Leadership and Organisational Development / Head of Third Sector, *The Kings Fund*

Alastair Wilson; Chief Executive, *School for Social Entrepreneurs*