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Promoting Better Public Services Leadership

An Appreciative Critique

The authors of the *Better Public Services Advisory Group Report* (the BPS report) have concluded in a refreshingly unequivocal way that, in order to create 'a public service and state sector that is achieving value-for-money, is innovative, provides high-quality services and manages change effectively', the task with which they were charged to investigate, 'the single most critical driver of successful change is leadership' (Better Public Services Advisory Group (BPSAG), 2011, pp.3, 53).

As leadership scholars we were naturally delighted, and, of course, not the least bit surprised, by this conclusion. After all, 'leadership' is one of those concepts which tends to be liberally drawn upon as both the source of and the solution to many of society's problems, from the global financial crisis to global warming. Indeed, leadership is a very handy catch-all term that never seems to lose its rhetorical appeal. Scepticism aside, we are deeply convinced in the power of effective leadership in galvanising groups to grapple collectively with the most challenging and entrenched problems. We have directly witnessed this (and the reverse) in our experience as developers, as well as through our reading of a veritable mountain of academic papers.

The burgeoning leadership industry has been both helpful and unhelpful in promoting a clearer and shared understanding, and better practice in leadership. We agree with Barbara Kellerman in her recent critique of the industry, *The End of Leadership*, that we need to do better if we want to be a part of the solution, not the problem (Kellerman, 2012). Specifically, we need to shift from a preoccupation with seeking out heroic leaders to point the way forward in an increasingly uncertain age to encouraging the public to actively create leadership, by both participating in a more active way with civic life and demanding more engaged leadership from those in positions of authority. Without such engagement it is unlikely that we will get very far in tackling complex and emergent issues. We were, therefore, heartened and energised by the stance that the authors of the Better Public Services report took when they concluded quite forcefully that the leadership challenge of our present age is related to more systemic, more integrative, more distributed and more purpose-driven approaches to leading.

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In this article we will focus on the four 'better' leadership practices that are promoted by the authors of the Better Public Services report when they envisage a future public service that is truly responsive, flexible and innovative, as well as efficient and effective. We will also draw on the draft issues paper entitled 'Leadership for improved results' which informed some of the BPS advisory group's thinking (Secretariat for State Sector Reform, 2011). We will assess the rationale for each of these practices and suggest what might be missing and how these might be further enhanced. In this regard we wish to present an appreciative critique that actively draws on the most salient and progressive leadership research, and, in the process, make what we hope will be helpful suggestions for ensuring that these new leadership practices are developed in support of a truly better public service.

Better leadership is underpinned by better governance

The linkage between governance and leadership practices has only recently begun to be explicitly recognised and actively worked upon. While they are often studied and developed in isolation, we now recognise that how an organisation chooses to govern itself – by which we mean the corporate governance of an organisation – will either constrain or enable the leadership it can exercise over its internal and external stakeholders (Erakovic and Jackson, 2012). Research conducted by the New Zealand Leadership Institute involving both chairs of boards and chief executives from a wide range of private, public and not-for-profit organisations identified a number of consequences, many of them unintended, that entrenched governance practices had in constraining the scale and scope of leadership.

While it is unfortunate that the BPS report does not dwell in any great detail on what kinds of changes to current governance practices will need to be made in order to promote the type of boundary-crossing, purpose-driven leadership it is advocating, it does recognise that certain governance mechanisms, with varying degrees of formality and permanence, will need to be put in place to oversee the leaders. For example, the advisory group notes that '[boards] could also be used to support chief executives in leading a sector, and are already being used (eg, in the justice sector …). More use of sector boards could support collective responsibility for results, including use of resources and stakeholder management' (BPSAG, 2011, p.47).

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In addition the advisory group does, in a few places in the report, make specific reference to the role of the minister in influencing the kind of leadership that might be practiced by senior public servants. For example, it notes that 'if Ministers concurred in this analysis, it could be envisaged that a single chief executive in each sector be charged with lead responsibility for delivering the Government's priority results and for a preparing a *Results Action Plan*' (ibid.).

Senior civil service and political leaders should view their governance role as active players in leadership delivery, not as arm's-length police officers of the process. They have a vital role to play in shaping the purpose and ongoing delivery of public leadership. It is the creation of a 'them and us' culture of governance that is widely credited with contributing to the global financial crisis, where operational officers worked around governance structures and those involved in governance followed too narrow a 'checks and balances' remit.

An important role of governance is to guide purpose and meaning – for senior leaders to have their skin in the game. Missing from the report is an acknowledgement that, no matter how perfectly crafted the policy is on paper, it is politicians who will be tasked with selling, and living or dying by, the results. Experiences of a more systemic approach to leadership tend to be met with enthusiasm in professional circles, yet with confusion and even anger amongst the public. It is one thing to suggest a more streamlined, technically advanced solution; another to turn such a vision into reality. While the report undoubtedly offers a powerful case for a better future, it presents an under-developed political framing as to how we might get there, particularly in terms of enrolling the public in the potentially contentious specifics (Grint, forthcoming).

Experiences in the United Kingdom have shown that proceeding with such systemic leadership in practice can be a much harder task than the production of a stimulating report. The problem is, of course, that people tend not to be rational, dispassionate creatures, but full of hopes, fears and cultural predispositions towards one world view or another (Ariely, 2008). Political messages do not reach the public in a pure, unmediated form. Rather, they do so piecemeal, scattered across time and space, with a heavy dose of spin from the mass media, which, of course, will be motivated by its own interests, not necessarily those of its viewers and readers (Iyengar, 2005).

A citizen or a public servant, for that matter, will be unlikely to encounter the sensible administrative ideas, such as a standardising of systems or the consolidation of budgets, contained within BPS report in holistic terms, but rather as a fractured series of one-off experiences: for example, reading a local press story about cuts in a certain agency, or noticing additional police presence in a neighbourhood. Moreover, experience

in the UK shows that people rarely respond with enthusiasm towards such far-reaching, abstract policy initiatives. David Cameron's poll ratings started to plummet when he built his core narrative around the 'Big Society' idea. While not dead in the water, the idea has since been pushed underwater, there but rarely spoken about in the open.

Prior to the coalition government taking power in Britain, Labour promoted a 'Total Place' approach to service delivery. Total Place viewed a much more proactive, positive role for government within society, with a belief that government could be made to work towards radical social change. In Total Place, local delivery agencies were provided with some central funding to tackle a particularly pressing, cross-sector issue (such as children's health and well-being). Emphasis was placed not on individual, heroic transformation but on a group of collective minds working together on a problem previously regarded as intractable. All of the important players regarded as integral to sustaining a leadership solution to the issue worked together in a single project team, to better connect, target, integrate and innovate (Leadership Centre for Local Government, 2010). Although radical in ambition, the policy, perhaps acknowledging the tough sell of such abstract policy to the public, was placed in the background come election time. As Labour lost the election in 2010, so too the policy seemed to lose momentum, in favour of the Big Society, which has also subsequently been shuffled off into the background.

The ideological underpinnings of the Better Public Services report more closely resemble the government-driven solutions of the UK's Total Place (i.e. government can work well, if reformed more in the direction of a collaborative governance model) than Big Society (government does not deliver for people, which is why we need more direct involvement from business and the voluntary sector in delivering core public services). It is a model based upon collaboration rather than competition.

This points to a significant political leadership challenge for such systemic solutions. We identify two core implications for leadership. The first is one of realpolitik. Any political party pursuing such systemic leadership will need to pay heed to its local elements: what will politicians be saying about these initiatives at a local level, where the consequences will be felt? The second is more ideological. The report in and of itself is not particularly left- or right-wing; it is relatively ideologically neutral, albeit more collaborative than its potential alternatives. Yet it is also ambiguous in as much as the collaborative language is contradicted by its emphasis on strong, central command functions. So which is it to be? Are we serious about systemic, collaborative leadership, or hedging our bets? This is a leadership agenda that could be picked up and reformed by either the centre right or centre left, built around the values of either, but it awaits a big, bold, ideological sell, which will demand considerable courage and spending of political capital.

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Better leadership combines administrative leadership with adaptive leadership

While 'leadership' appears to be the central concept of the report, when we subject it to more scrutiny what we find is a description of a more managerial set of tasks and roles. For example, the report addresses the need for a 'culture-build process across the state services', but views the solution to this challenge as technical, 'defining the behaviours required of all state employees (for example, integrity, innovation, continuous improvement), strongly communicating and reinforcing these expectations wherever they are displayed, and aligning the formal parts of the system to incentivise, support and reward these behaviours (eg, recruitment, performance agreements and performance review processes' (p.53). The diagnosis of the problem is one rooted in a living system but the prescription draws heavily on well-trodden mechanistic, managerial solutions. For example, the leadership solutions are seen to be the sole preserve of the 'leaders' at the top of the organisation, who are charged with getting the 'managers' below them on side so that they, in turn, can get the 'employees' on side too. The report strongly recommends that the State Services Commissioner and the chief executive of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet come together to 'bring together more closely the Government's overall priorities with the levers to make change happen' (ibid.). This presents a conventional 'magical' view of leadership as the result of isolated action by individuals endowed with the mystical ability to bring leadership to life (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003). The problem, of course, lies in the notion that the 'levers' are mechanically connected throughout the entire machinery of government.

We acknowledge the importance of personal accountability and targets within the public sector, where people's taxes have to be accounted for and spent wisely. It would be naïve to suggest otherwise. Indeed, the science of management has always walked hand in hand with the art of leadership: one seems impossible without the other (Grint, 2005b). Yet the report seems preoccupied with administrative solutions situated in a strong patriarchal model of leadership. The recommended action does not match the rhetoric of cross-system collaboration. Mary Uhl-Bien (2006) has concluded that leadership within complex environments requires administrative leadership (i.e. top-down, holding a structure and setting targets), adaptive leadership (i.e. bottom-

up, locally responsive) and enabling leadership (i.e. linking administrative and adaptive leadership). The report does a good job of formulating the new forms of administrative leadership that are required, but is strangely silent on the new types of adaptive and enabling leadership that will also be required. Targets plus personal accountability do not equal adaptive leadership.

Grint and Holt (2011) have observed that a key public leadership responsibility is not to protect the public or staff from the realities of tough economic times but to expose them to the discomfort of the situation, so that they feel the 'heat' of leadership (Heifetz, 1994). Such an idea has serious consequences in a time of economic hardship, as it is an expectation that people will face up to the reality of the situation and engage in a discussion about a range of solutions which may be equally unpalatable. This is a counterintuitive notion for many, as the traditional model of leadership is one of individual leaders holding responsibility (and the blame) for pressing public issues (Grint, 2010). It is only when all public servants take on and personally own an issue that pressing and seemingly intractable issues might begin to be solved. Such a view of leadership implies that the role of government is to provide a holding structure enabling local and front-line leaders to take risks and make mistakes and thereby learn leadership together. The short-term consequences might very well result in uncomfortable newspaper headlines. In fact, we would argue that if local adaptive leadership is not generating any uncomfortable coverage it is possible that leadership is not, in fact, being exercised. In this regime, senior politicians and civil servants become the protectors of innovation, the guardians of leadership, creating a fire-break to create the space for leadership locally. Their role is to connect, as much as innovate and provide structure.

In this sense, senior leaders need to embody the leadership vision and challenge. Their words should be connected to their deeds, with senior leaders prepared to both set an adaptive challenge but also defend those generating leadership on the ground. As such, a relationship of authentic leadership may be created, less rooted in individual brilliance or competencies, more embedded in robust relationships of trust (Nicholson and Carroll, forthcoming; Smolovic Jones and Grint, forthcoming).

Better leadership is purpose-driven not targets-driven

Another strength of the Better Public Services report is its explicit recognition that better leadership can happen if it is rooted in a shared purpose that can galvanise public servants as well as citizens over the long haul in a way that specific individual or team or departmental performance targets do not (Kempster, Jackson and Conroy, 2011). As Hughes and Smart note, 'Citizens have begun to demand more from their public service than just outputs and efficiency. In order to continue the positive trends of the previous decades, the system must continue to evolve to appreciate the importance of outcomes and effectiveness' (Hughes and Smart, 2012, p.3). In the short term, targets do tend to stimulate individual attention and focus the mind and effort, but they generally do not succeed either in maintaining focus in the long term or in building the scale of combined effort that is required to tackle the tougher, more intractable systemic problems that are meaningful to a large portion of the population. Everybody is quick to recognise that leadership is important, but the all-important 'for what?' question is rarely addressed.

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In a recent *Policy Quarterly,* Robinson referred to Christopher Hood's trenchant observation that '"the element of terror" involved in the targets in UK public sector management had made it a "distant cousin" of the system in the USSR' and succeeded only in creating a '"hanging admirals" culture' (Robinson, 2012, p.11). This view of the UK's target-driven strategy of the first- and partly second-term Blair governments is widely acknowledged, even by Blair himself (Blair, 2010), who regarded a targets culture as a short-term solution. Stories abounded of underhand tactics in delivering on targets, with chief executives familiar with the connotations of a 'call from the Minister'. Yet the driving of results through strict targets was viewed as but the first step in repairing broken public services. From there, the Blair government introduced a regime of competition into health care and education, with the introduction of academy schools and foundation hospitals (Le Grand, 2007).

The strategy outlined in the BPS report is one of collaboration around a common purpose, rather than competition around specific metrics. It is guided by the hope that public professionals will want to lead across systems rather than compete within systems: 'shift[ing] the overall balance of decision-rights in the state services away from individual agencies and towards the needs of the system' (BPSAG, 2011, p.53). The '10 challenging results' for the public sector to achieve over the next five years are a combination of ends and means that is a step in the right direction along the target–purpose continuum. There are elements of both contained within them, although the purpose tends to be implied rather than made explicit. It will be interesting to see the extent to which individuals and organisations choose to view these as being targets or as providing purpose-driven direction.

The strength of collaboration is that it acknowledges that our public services exist in order to solve messy, complex social problems (Grint, 2005b). The problem with collaboration is that there is no single, simple leadership solution. If that were the case, then the problem would not be complex and there would be no need for leadership; management,

or command, would suffice. If we put aside the idea that leadership is best viewed within the unit of the individual, we are left with a view of leadership as being co-created relationally, collectively. Such a complex view of leadership acknowledges that local needs will vary and that leadership needs to be adaptive, with leaders given the space to learn how to lead in situ, across the system. This implies as much attention to more micro, mundane leadership practices as to grand strategy, as it is highly unlikely that a single strategy will suffice for all situations in all locations. As is noted by the report, the challenge is contextual, as 'different sectors will require different leadership arrangements' and at 'different times more or less formal arrangements' (p.47).

Senior leaders can't be everywhere at all times. They need the middle and lower tiers of organisations working together, across boundaries, to drive change. Leaders are only as effective as their followers allow them to be (Grint, 2005a).

The glaring implication here is the importance of horizontal, collaborative leadership development which is, in our view, an element that is not properly addressed in this report. The view of leadership development as an immediate priority is welcome. The idea of developing leadership across organisational boundaries is exciting and innovative, if short on detail. New Zealand's size means that we can think of our country's public service as a single, complex system. We believe the potential for developing leadership capacity across public agencies offers great scope for the future. The solution seems to be that of developing leadership across an issue, rather than an agency or department, which in turn implies a focus on adaptive, collective practice, not individually-focused psychometrics, the search for hero leaders, or even interpersonal 'communication' skills. There is no individual hero; our collective capacity can be inspiration enough. New Zealand has the enviable capacity to get 'the system' (i.e. people concerned with a particular leadership issue) in the same room: this is a unique opportunity for some very real and lasting leadership development.

Drawing in isolated individuals from departments or agencies for leadership development programmes is helpful, but only a partial solution. The art of leadership development in a complex environment is to enable a system to learn together. In other words, the learning and the work are so closely related as to be inseparable. It is a difficult and counterintuitive notion to accept because so much of our efforts and everyday functioning is rooted in the traditional programme or course, and even individual staff training budgets. Human resource professionals are generally employed to tend to the development needs of individuals, although sometimes groups, within the four walls of an organisation. The system as it currently stands is stacked against leadership development which can deliver more transformational change. This is not directly addressed in the Better Public Services report. Yet the challenge is very real – a structural and mindset challenge rooted in learnt, habitual thinking around development.

The advisory group's report is particularly strong and refreshing in the emphasis it places upon inter-group leadership, by giving great prominence to the need to lead across departmental boundaries in order to build the critical mass of expertise and resources needed to tackle the country's most significant problems, which don't fit cleanly along departmental or disciplinary lines.

Yet New Zealand, as a small and relatively prosperous country, is in a wonderful position to challenge orthodox thinking on leadership development, to make the system work for the leadership issues, instead of the present situation where the leadership issue is fragmented and distorted to work for the interests of the system.

There is still a role for the policy and leadership experts – to provide guidance and access to outside, cutting-edge ideas which may enable the system to work in a radically more effective way. But the development should be geared around the needs of the leadership issue, not vice versa. We need to stop thinking of the leadership development unit of analysis as a single person and see it instead as the system which works across a leadership issue. This is where the momentum and big wins are possible.

Better leadership breaks down boundaries

Leadership scholars have recently recognised that research and development has been far too preoccupied with understanding and fostering intra-organisational leadership (i.e. leadership *within* groups or organisations) rather than inter-group leadership (leadership between groups and organisations). Pittinsky and Simon (2007) note a tendency on the part of many leaders to foster strong intra-group leadership through solidarity by defining a strong sense of 'in' and 'out' groups. The limitations of this strategy soon become abundantly clear as leaders begin to attempt to bind 'in' and 'out' groups which have traditionally been in active competition with each other and so harbour deep suspicions, and, in some cases, are actively hostile to each other.

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to tackle the country's most significant problems, which don't fit cleanly along departmental or disciplinary lines. For example, the authors note that 'change is needed to allow resources to be applied to achieving results that span more than one department or that fall between the responsibilities of individual departments' (p.20). The report points to a couple of examples in which this has been achieved. It also recognises that a different type of leadership will need to be exhibited by senior public servants in order to pull this off. Indeed, the report could perhaps have gone even further by explicitly stating that some un-learning may need to take place to shift from tried-and-trusted, technically proficient, department-focused leadership.

While we applaud the call to break down boundaries within the public sector, we also believe there is an opportunity and a great need for leaders to look beyond the public service to break down barriers between the private and not-for-profit sectors in order to create 'public integrative leadership' that is aimed at tackling public problems that advance the public good (Crosby and Bryson, 2010). New Zealand's greatest strength is its relative simplicity due to its small size, and yet we still seem to insist on creating remarkably tall and impenetrable barriers between our sectors, when we might reasonably have expected in a society where 'everybody knows everybody' considerably greater movement of people, ideas and resources between them.

One powerful way in which we believe that this kind of public integrative leadership might be fostered is by shifting the focus of leadership from institution to place. If we centre our attention on preservation and innovation on our land, then we stretch our notion of what leadership is for. Not simply is it for making the present more efficient and effective for taxpayers (as important as this is), it is for safeguarding our services for future generations of New Zealanders. If this is the mission, then the drawing up and fierce protection of organisational boundaries will become considerably less meaningful or compelling. New Zealand is well placed to promote place-based leadership, as viewing land and place as meaningful in the present, past and future is central to the Māori world view. Who holds what position and which 'levers' of authority is fundamentally less important than the generation and cultivation of places of leadership into the future.

Much contemporary research in the sphere of leadership has focused upon how barriers between agencies and departments create unhelpful obstacles to change, with an accompanying body of evidence now showing that organisational boundaries are often a prime reason for the non-spread of innovation (Ferlie et al., 2005). If we think of leadership as related to the nurturing and cultivation of a place, then who holds which position of authority becomes less important. A powerful case has been made that the kind of leadership now required in our public sphere is what some writers refer to as nomad leadership, where we cultivate leaders who are not inhibited by positional constructs but who can work effectively both with boundary objects and across boundary constraints (Wood, 2005). Not that we should fantasise about a leadership world in which power plays no role; that would be naïvely utopian. Rather, what we suggest is that the art of leadership in this interconnected world is one where actors are able to draw upon their positional power and connections to establish new working relationships rooted in pressing social concerns (Crosby and Bryson, 2010). Such a regime of leadership requires a regime of support and formal collaborative agreement, for certain, but such challenges will vary depending on the specific local context – the challenge presented by the place, the land and its history. The competing leadership practices of working above, and yet also with, power suggest the development of leadership capacity to work within contested and complex environments.

Leadership is not the preserve of the formally appointed 'leaders'; it must be seen as something that has to be created by all who work in the public sector in partnership with citizens and the business sector.

Conclusion

Overall, we are encouraged by the vision of future leadership practices that is painted in the Better Public Services report. Indeed, there is much to commend in the report beyond the fact that it recognises that leadership, not management, is paramount in promoting organisational change. We strongly endorse the move from results to outcomes, and propose an even stronger purpose orientation that we believe could generate even greater traction if it is explicitly anchored in place and backed by strong government and governance support.

We also applaud the shift from a preoccupation with intra-organisational to inter-group leadership, but caution against the expectation that the twin demands of building partnerships and 'keeping the home fires burning' is a simple question of 'doing more with less'. Very real tensions will arise as a result of competing priorities and depleting resource allocation which will require political acuity on the part of senior leaders.

We appreciate the recognition in the report that this new type of collaborative, purpose-driven leadership begins with modelling from the top but cannot be controlled directly by the top. A space must be created for bottom-up, adaptive leadership processes that might actively challenge administrative leadership. Leadership is not the preserve of the formally appointed 'leaders'; it must be seen as something that has to be created by all who work in the public sector in partnership with citizens and the business sector. A critical linking element between the administrative leadership

processes that are the focus of this report, and the adaptive leadership processes that ultimately drive change throughout the system and beyond into the nation is enabling leadership. This is often unrecognised, but a vital process provided by the middle managers who are often characterised as the dyed-in-the-wool resisters of change, and this report is no different in that regard.

Finally, we endorse the recognition that leadership can be significantly enabled or constrained by the quality of governance that is exhibited. The report occasionally acknowledges the need for the ministers to buy in to this new approach to leadership, but we need to recognise that the kind of governance that has traditionally been manifested by government may also need to be revisited, overhauled and reformed.

Elsewhere we have argued that New Zealand could become the 'testing ground' for new leadership practices and frameworks that can respond to the complexities that much of the world is now grappling with (Jackson, 2012). New Zealand derived a great deal of pride from fostering 'new public management' in the 1980s which was taken up to varying degrees by other public services around the world (Ryan and Gill, 2011). Why can't it now do the same for 'new public leadership'?

The challenge for New Zealand public leadership is a shift of leadership mindset. Shifting from an organisation- or department-focused mindset to one centred on pressing systemic social issues is a difficult one. It does not mean dispensing with accountability, but working with accountabilities differently. Leadership practice across boundaries is context-dependent, concerned with power and the politics of meaning. It is about building coalitions that will work together and learn together: the leadership development is embedded in the work, and vice versa. Such a challenge implies a range of alternative leadership practices, which need to be developed collectively; they are less valuable if isolated within the units of disparate, individual managers. In a world where much talk is dedicated to collaborative leadership, very little of it is visible in practice. New Zealand is in a strong position.

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