Leadership Matters: Tensions in Evaluating Leadership Development

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Abstract

The Problem and Solution: This paper explores some of the tensions that required careful management in the design and delivery of a leadership development program. This discussion draws particularly upon a formal evaluation of two cohorts, each comprising approximately 20 senior managers working in adult social care. Complexity theory, notably Complex Responsive Processes of Relating, is used to make visible, explore and articulate the need to hold in tension apparently contradictory forces and requirements. The program was established at a critical time in the UK government's public services reform agenda, which was unfolding during a period of increasing resource constraint. This included a requirement upon commissioners to demonstrate impact and return on investment (RoI) in development programs. However, complexity theory explains why a direct causal relationship between inputs and outcomes is not amenable to demonstration by evaluation. Consequently, the approach to demonstrating RoI explored the micro-processes underpinning the development of the participants' thinking and practice through formative real time and *post hoc* evaluation. This comprised a range of qualitative techniques: extended observations provided an 'ethnographic' overview of the program; participant and stakeholder interviews gave insight into critical incidents and key learning points; and guided conversations placed greater emphasis on the everyday experience of participants in applying their learning. It is argued that such an approach to evaluation is both a research intervention and a contribution to the development process.

Stakeholders: Our paper will be of particular relevance to Human Resource professionals, leadership development practitioners, commissioners, business schools and evaluators facing the challenge of finding meaningful measures of 'RoI' for individual and organizational development.

Key words: complexity theory, complex responsive processes of relating, evaluation, leadership development, tensions

> We're not alone in taking out 30% of our management costs. It's fine when you have a cadre of skills, but how do you develop managers in this climate? We need a different level of conversation altogether for leadership development.
> *Participant quote*

This paper uses the theory of Complex Responsive Process of Relating (Stacey 2003, 2010; Shaw, 2002; Mowles, 2011) to explore some of the tensions that were being managed by commissioners, program managers and evaluators in the design, delivery and evaluation of a leadership development program. This program drew participants from senior management positions in adult social care and health organizations across the South-West of England during a period of significant change and upheaval.

Much has been written on the implications of a 'modernization' agenda in the UK public sector (Gleeson and Knights, 2006; Mayo, Hoggett and Miller, 2007) and the two decades since its introduction have been characterized by unprecedented levels of turbulence. The current economic climate and the 'austerity package' that has accompanied it have served to increase levels of uncertainty and anxiety, which one program participant likened to '*leading in the face of a tsunami*'. An emerging body of literature emphasizes the requirement for a relational approach to leadership under such conditions of complexity. For example, Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) draw on the work of Bakhtin (1986) on polyphony and heteroglossia (a diversity of voices and ideas) and Riceour's (1992) ideas on intersubjectivity, where we are 'always speaking and acting in relation to others' (p. 1439). Such approaches to leadership require similarly relational approaches to leadership development and its evaluation and as Bolden (2005, p.12) suggests, when discussing leadership development we are including both 'development of human and social capital'. The theory of Complex Responsive Processes of Relating was employed in both the design and evaluation of the leadership development program explored in this paper. This makes an important contribution to the literature on the evaluation of leadership development because the theory gives central attention to the everyday relational experience of managers and treats conversation and relationship as a process of inquiry.

We begin with a discussion of the implications of adopting a complex responsive processes approach to the evaluation of leadership development. This provides a framework for the presentation of the findings of the evaluation study, which focus on the tensions being managed in the design, delivery and evaluation of the program. Particular attention is given to the tensions and

contradictions participants highlighted in relation to their leadership learning and practice. We conclude by suggesting that the value in refocusing leadership development and its evaluation is that whilst these tensions cannot be resolved, the potential for developing collective wisdom (Symonette, 2007) is increased through their exploration.

Evaluating leadership development through a complexity lens

The challenges of evaluating leadership development

In this paper we argue for an approach to evaluation that is both research *and* a contribution to the processes of development. As such, it must be practiced in a manner that is both conscious of and transparent about its focus, purpose and values if it is to be rigorous as a measure of effectiveness and support leadership sense-making. However, Norris and Kushner (2007) note that in the UK public sector, evaluation is often politicized as a tool of program funders, commissioners, government and policy makers and is viewed through a narrow, reductionist lens of accountability, used only to demonstrate 'evidence' of impact, missing its potential to contribute to learning (Hayward and Voller, 2010). Indeed, Chapman (2004) argues that by assuming simplistic cause and effect, ignoring unintended consequences and measuring only outcomes, this approach to evaluation may actively block learning.

By contrast, anthropological approaches to the evaluation of leadership development (Turnbull and Edwards, 2005) illuminate the ways that leadership learning becomes embedded and enacted through the interplay of culture and context. Burns (2009, p. 6) argues 'we need to look wider than causal attribution, beyond numbers and beyond traditional qualitative material to understand the dynamics of a process, not to ask 'what's happening', but 'how' and why it is happening'. Quantitative methods can play a valuable role in the evaluation of leadership development but a wider evaluative lens is required; one that is contextually informed (Hannum, Martineau and Reinelt, 2007) enabling the exploration of the rich complex patterns of human interaction. From this perspective, the micro-details of conversations can be essential to understanding development. It is in this sense that the theory of complex responsive processes is particularly appropriate as it provides the basis of an approach to evaluation that can accommodate the exploration of tensions and

contradictions. Such an approach involves asking broader and deeper questions, employing a mix of methods, constantly exploring what works, or not, and why. When evaluation is viewed as both research *and* development it becomes a process of collaborating and knowledge sharing, which harvests collective wisdom and enables thoughtful investment in leadership development.

Complex responsive processes applied to evaluation and leadership development

There are a range of complexity perspectives that are receiving increasing attention in the health and social care sectors (e.g. Sweeney and Griffiths, 2002; Uhl-Bien, Marion and McKelvey, 2007; Mitleton-Kelly 2011; Benington and Hartley, 2009). We draw on the theory of complex responsive processes of relating because it facilitates an understanding of organizations in terms of relationship rather than as systems or collections of individuals.

Stacey, Griffin and Shaw (2000) present the theory of complex responsive processes (CRP) as a radical alternative to dominant systems theories. They provide an extensive critique that contrasts CRP with theories of general systems (von Bertallanfy, 1968; Miller and Rice, 1967), cybernetic systems (Beer, 1967), systems dynamics (Senge, 1990) and complex systems (Thietart and Forgue, 1995; Wheatley, 1999). Systems theories tend to focus on the conditions required for improved performance and the changes required to move to that state. This can engender an understanding of leadership and its development as phenomena that can be conducted 'at one step removed' as 'system designer'. In contrast, a process perspective focuses on the evolving dynamics of relating that make an organization what it is and how it is emerging and continuously evolving. Neither the leader, nor the leader's development, can be thought of as somehow 'detached' from the process and able to be influenced from the sidelines. Rather the practices of leadership and leadership development are an integral part of the emergent process.

Consequently, our attention is drawn away from a focus upon the individual and towards conversational processes and the emergence and identification of narrative themes. Its contribution as a conceptual framework for the evaluation of leadership development stems from this: in placing relationship at the center, it has the potential to provide the narrative thread that discontinuous change threatens to destroy. And since all members of an organization participate in relationships

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with other members, it acknowledges that all have a degree of power and influence, through their actions and responses (Zeldin, 1995).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive review of the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, but we outline in the following sections some of the key implications of CRP that are of relevance in the evaluation of a leadership development program. These implications are used later in the paper as a framework for exploring the findings of our evaluation. This analysis demonstrates how such an approach to evaluation allows us to explore the inherent tensions and contradictions of such a development program in ways that can deepen learning and foster creativity and change.

Quality of participation, inputs and action

Little positive things from [the program] creep in every day - it helped me feel more comfortable with emergence and uncertainty and helped me reassure my team. I have learned not to ascribe outcomes in advance.
Participant

Principles of non-linearity and emergence that are central ideas in complexity theory suggest that outcomes are often unpredictable and outside of an individual's control (Stacey, 2010) and where we can have most influence and accountability is for our 'inputs'. CRP eschews the fantasy of control and argues that the leader is just as much a participant in the emerging pattern of relating as anyone else. This is not to suggest that individuals are impotent or their behaviour irrelevant. The significance of positional leaders, for example, does not diminish: one merely understands their power differently, at least in terms of recognizing that they are not 'in control' and cannot present a blueprint for an innovative future (Stacey, 2003, p. 334).

For the leader-as-participant, self-awareness is a key competence. Antonacopoulou (2010) advocates a form of critical reflexivity based on Aristotle's notion of phronesis or 'practical wisdom' (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011). In practice, awareness of self and one's values (and acting from them) encourages consistency. It involves engaging with 'everyday' events, responding to 'local conditions' as they unfold and taking responsibility for noticing, learning from and acting on new information as it emerges. The 'problem posing' approaches (Friere, 1970) adopted on the program and the shared responsibility for sense making embedded in the evaluation approach are examples of an active quality of participation

in practice and are reinforced by informing and engaging with program managers and commissioners on a continuous basis.

Quality of relationships, influence and awareness of self

Harris and Leberman (2012, p. 36) highlight the opportunities leadership development programs create for extra-organizational developmental relationships to flourish and for new informal networks to grow. The implication is that by attending to the quality of relationships, new forms of organizational process will inevitably emerge. However, this is not simple and CRP is a theory of power, and this must also be attended to: self organization is a process of mutual constraining and hence a form of control (Stacey, 2003) and power exists in seen and unseen networks of relationships and tactics (Foucault, 1979).

A leadership development program can provide an environment for the exploration of the development of relationships, offering a safe reflective space to promote learning (e.g. Vince, 1998; Blackler and Kennedy, 2004; Senge, Scharmer, Jakorski and Flowers, 2005). A CRP lens when applied to evaluation suggests an approach based on relationships and trust as essential to sharing authentic accounts of experience and uncovering collective wisdom, underpinned by an approach to leadership development that values different domains of expertise and the importance on 'connecting' and peer-to-peer spaces.

Quality of conversational life, diversity and the holding of anxiety

You need to have conversations with others, that's how ideas arrive.
Participant

Complex responsive processes theory pays close attention to the quality of conversational life in an organization, suggesting that when conversation gets stuck in repetitive patterns, it can stifle change. This can manifest itself in comments like *we've been here before*. By contrast, free-flowing conversation – often starting as 'coffee-break conversations' (Shaw, 2002), for example, in the margins of the organization – encourages new ideas to take hold. Creativity and change may emerge through free-flowing conversation, where a diversity of voices and ideas are allowed to flourish and can move from the margins to the mainstream.

A complex responsive processes approach suggests that diversity and difference can provoke tension, challenge and surprise (Fonseca, 2002; Walshe, Harvey, Skelcher and Jas, 2009) and a plurality of voices and perspectives that encourage creativity and change. Many features typically categorized as unhealthy and unhelpful (for example, deviance, destruction, surprise, misunderstanding, shadow conversations) are recognized as important to achieving and maintaining organizational health.

Ever present tensions between apparently contradictory ideas, conditions or forces are never resolved but may be continuously transformed, recognizing the creative potential in tension and contradiction. This emphasizes the importance of leadership as a container for anxiety, since when the anxiety that inevitably accompanies unpredictability and change is 'contained' it promotes learning and change (Vince, 1998). Both the program and the evaluation study paid close attention to introducing diversity into conversational life, through techniques such as dialogical approaches to development (Isaacs, 1999); embodied learning (Billy and Jowitt, 2012); appreciative inquiry (Sorensen, Yaeger, Savall, Zardet, Bonnet and Peron, 2010) and constellations (Abbotson and Lustig, 2005). This valuing of diversity is reinforced by, for example, selecting participants from a range of organizational and professional backgrounds, actively seeking out and appreciating different stakeholder perspectives; and adopting learning processes that are respectful of and encourage the articulation of a wide range of different, sometimes conflicting, views.

The Evaluation Study

Program and context

The evaluation study was concerned with a leadership development program for senior managers working in adult social care. It covered the first two cohorts of the program (43 participants in total), which took place over a twenty month period between autumn 2009 and summer 2011. Each run of the program comprised a launch day, three residential blocks (each of three days duration), and a final - shared - celebratory day.

The program was established at a critical time in the UK government's public services reform agenda, which was unfolding during a period of increasing resource constraint and a prevailing discourse of '*more for less*'. The reform agenda is transformational and its impact is experienced at multiple levels, including: significant structural change (for example, new - to the sector -

organizational forms such as social enterprise, the redrawing of the boundaries between health and social care, providers and commissioners, merging of functions across a wider geographic area); the reorganization of service delivery around the 'personalization' agenda (where the service user has more influence over their individual 'budget') and service 'integration'; and substantial reductions in staffing levels to achieve the required cost savings. Many of the participants on the program were then faced with the leadership challenge of simultaneously containing the anxiety provoked by high levels of turbulence, uncertainty and ambiguity around the future of individuals, services and organizations, whilst (reapplying) for roles in these new organizations. As one participant described the leadership challenges they face:

> The austerity measures and bringing in such a big change program combined are
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> huge forces. I changed roles at the outset of the program - a huge change and
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> scary. It's the fact that you're bringing in change with a jaded workforce, getting
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> people to see that they need to be different.

This context reinforced a requirement upon commissioners to demonstrate impact and return on investment (RoI), in terms of both service improvement and the development of individual leadership capability. Whilst in practice this inevitably leads to contradictions in design priorities, this was a tension readily embraced because of our commitment to addressing leadership development and evaluation from a relational perspective, which requires an explicit engagement with apparent contradictions.

Framing of the evaluation

The criteria for evaluation set out by the program commissioners included a focus on the following anticipated outcomes: (a) development of leadership capability and evidence of application of learning to deliver the transformation agenda; (b) evidence of changed behavior around the key themes of change and innovation, personal impact, collaboration, performance and outcomes; and (c) support for integrated service delivery across health and social care.

The initial brief implied a desire on the part of the commissioners to find a 'solution' to a perceived 'leadership gap'. The program had been funded to fill this gap and there was an expectation

that the evaluation would concern itself primarily with demonstrating whether the program had delivered a sufficient return on this investment – in essence, a linear, 'cause and effect' approach to evaluation with a focus on outcomes and end points.

This was in conflict with the framing of the evaluation using a relational approach, which was proposed and ultimately adopted. This is an approach in which the main focus is on the journey rather than the destination and on exploring the emergent forms of relational leadership. Taking such an approach to evaluation assumed that any effects of the program would be indirect, behavioral, enacted through relationships and conversation, occur over time and would be messy and difficult to capture in a demonstrably 'cause-effect' manner.

There was a fundamental tension between the desire to demonstrate that the program provided an effective solution and the belief that it is not possible to demonstrate effectiveness in this way. Adopting this approach felt like a risk for commissioners, providers and participants alike, but this sense of risk was mitigated by concerted efforts on everyone's part to contribute to the program's effectiveness. In short, this mirrored the principles of CRP in requiring a high quality of participation, relationship, conversation and diversity within the commissioning, program delivery and evaluation processes. One of the characteristics that developed over time was a high level of trust and quality of relationship.

The evaluation sought to illuminate 'what is really going on here?' by identifying and investigating the inter-relating factors appearing to shape the dynamic of learning, the role of tools to support learning, and the impact of structures and systems in enabling learning. A challenge for the evaluation then was to adopt an approach that worked with the 'messy complexity' of learning and gave attention to the 'everyday experience' of participants whilst also providing insight into the 'return on investment'. The primary focus of the evaluation approach was conversation, which enabled exploration of the rich complexity and tensions around the agenda of leadership in the challenging arena of social care.

Methodology

In recognition of this tension, the evaluation drew on a mix of, predominantly qualitative, methods and sources of data. Methods were selected to provide insight into the everyday experience of the leadership development program and the learning process, and to investigate the impact and application of learning back in participants' workplaces. Methods included:

- extended evaluator observations (9 days in total), which gave access to the everyday conversational life of the program, as it unfolded in the moment

- timely feedback of findings from these observations to participants, facilitators and commissioners, which recognized the role of evaluation as learning *and* development, and allowed the diversity of conversations and ideas emerging in one module to unfold and flow into the next, through an iterative process. This also brought commissioners into the conversation at key stages, helping to contain any anxiety they were experiencing around the more emergent approach taken to program design and evaluation.

- open telephone interviews with 23 and 20 participants at an interim stage of the program and post-program respectively. These explored participants' experience of the translation of their learning into the workplace. As well as providing insight into the interaction between local contexts (the program and the participant's workplace) and the quality of conversation, a number of participants commented unprompted on their value as a space for deepening self-reflection, learning and development.

- 14 exploratory interviews with participants' Directors and other stakeholders brought the voices of different stakeholder groups into the conversation and contributed to the evaluation of the translation of participants' learning into the workplace and deepened understanding of the roles of other stakeholders in enabling the application of new learning.

These qualitative approaches were combined with statistical analysis of feedback data from a 360 degree questionnaire administered at the beginning and 6 months following the final event and designed to highlight differences pre- and post-program. The rich texture of the qualitative data served to illuminate the underlying complexity and meaning of the small changes visible on the surface of the 360 measure.

Taken together, these methods prompted rich conversation, combined to provide routes in to raising key questions around what is going on here and why, and provided the basis for sense

making and the pooling of collective wisdom. Our analysis retained this emphasis on the quality of conversational life and focused on understanding the individual's transformative learning experience in context and in relation to their everyday experience of leadership (Burns, 2007; Hannum et al., 2007; Turnbull and Edwards, 2005). The final elements of the evaluation, including *post hoc* interviews with participants and key stakeholders, concluded in late 2011.

In the following section we report on the findings of the evaluation through the lens of complex responsive processes theory, focusing on the tensions and contradictions highlighted.

Findings and Analysis

> If you really want a different type of leader you have to do something different. If you value true leadership you will get that.
> *Participant*

Rowling (2011) calls for leadership development in the UK National Health Service to be firmly located within the context and systems within which they function, arguing that commissioners and providers alike are in danger of falling foul of supporting 'heroic' models of leadership. Conversely, attention needs to be paid to the suitability of the immediate environment to enable individual leaders to translate learning into practice. Our findings support this and suggest that the participants' complex and ambiguous environment requires a quality of relational leadership (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011) and leadership development approaches that challenge the status quo. In applying to the design of this leadership development program and its evaluation principles and approaches consistent with complex responsive processes theory we have sought to refocus attention

- on relationship, rather than on the 'heroic individual'; and
- on the quality of conversational life and the centrality of everyday interactions, rather than on the grand narrative.

We believe in doing so we have reconfirmed the value of time for reflection and space for embedding learning and change.

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Our findings are presented using the themes introduced earlier. Where direct quotes are included below they are from program participants unless otherwise noted.

Quality of participation, inputs and action

> It was good to have a safe place and a group you could talk to - you could breathe out a little bit, the magic got transferred and allowed a perspective and avoiding rushing 'to do'.

'Breathing out a little bit' provided the space for program participants to pay attention to the quality of their participation and to provoke changes in leadership behaviors:

> Before I was policy and procedure driven and I've had a shift. It's about being overarching and thinking differently and allowing creative space and allowing people scope.

as well as to notice that '*It's often the unexpected that you learn from*'.

The emphasis on taking responsibility for the quality of one's participation tended to shift attention from outputs to inputs so that, paradoxically, in relinquishing attempts to control the responses of others, one may feel more 'in control' of one's own gestures. By focusing on facilitating participation the design of the development programme was able to encourage growth in collective wisdom rather than merely the acquisition of knowledge and understanding. Similarly, the framing of evaluation as research *and* development meant that, for example, evaluator observations fed back in 'real time' encouraged a greater depth of participation through critical reflexivity, enhancing self- and other-awareness. .

However, this development did have a flip side. Peters and Baum (2007, p. 64) claim '*One of the oldest truths about training and development is that it makes little sense to send newly trained people back into unchanged organizations. The organization always wins*.' A number of participants experienced this tension, and the frustration that accompanied it, back in their workplace, when they felt they were on a developmental journey that more senior managers and organizational constraints would inhibit:

> I feel as though we've been offered a real opportunity and then you get back to the day job and they just want deliverables not leadership!

Quality of relationships, influence and awareness of self

Our findings highlight both a general paucity of peer-to-peer relationships and the value participants attached to forming them, noting

"The relationships were key… You don't foster these outside of a program. It's the informal stuff that is powerful."

Some of the approaches to learning involved work in smaller task focused groups and contributed to both the development of relationships and service improvement goals. The contribution some of these groups made to service improvements was influential, helping to move informal networks into more formal networks that were formally resourced:

The real value was getting [a group] working across local authorities and coming-up with proposals for doing a bigger piece of work. It was really constructive in showing how we can work together. The idea of a network is now being taken forward. [This] helped Directors see the benefit of their networking.

The evaluation reinforced the value of peer networks with key stakeholders, notably senior managers and commissioners, as well as with participants, highlighting their importance through guided conversations and feedback from Peer Learning Groups. This led to continuing support for one another and participation in an ongoing leadership development process through a commitment to building and maintaining networks beyond the end of the program.

Coupled with the value of time out from the stress and pace of work, peer relationships formed on the program contributed to both personal resilience and service and organizational resilience. The evaluation noted the knock-on impact on relationships and practice back in the workplace:

The course has given me permission to make my own decisions in my own right... I felt able to stand up and say 'no'. It has helped me see that it's OK to have your own mind and to be more politically aware.

The changes in behavior that result from a development program of this kind, and particularly the shift in power relations as participants exercise greater influence in the workplace, is not always experienced positively. For example, in the 360 degree feedback process completed pre- and post-program, whilst the overall impact was 'numerically' positive (in line with the requirements for evidence of a satisfactory return on investment), the scores for 6 participants either remained unchanged or reduced slightly.

My 360 is going to get worse. There were a lot of things a lot of people thought

were great and scored me highly, but I am not going to be liked for not giving the

sort of reassurance people were after.

We suggest, however, that even these apparently 'negative' scores can be interpreted as evidence of the leadership development desired:

My Director tells me I have become more 'arsey' which for me is certainly a good

thing having lacked confidence in the past. I am not so sure it is always a good thing

for her.

This demonstrates something of the value of the diversity of methods employed in the evaluation and the use of 'rich data' gained from qualitative methods in bringing depth and color to quantitative measures. For whilst a degree of tension arose from this 'mixed feedback' as the commissioners were a little disappointed that this measure did not 'prove' impact, the interview transcripts illuminated the underlying complexity and meaning of the small changes visible on the surface of the 360 measures.

Pioneering new leadership behaviors can be challenging for senior managers. This highlights a further tension that can exist between an espoused commitment to meet participants' development needs for their next role and a lack of willingness to provide opportunities for participants to make use of these new capacities. As one Director put it:

I think the habit we can step into is saying we're giving someone an opportunity,

rather than seeing it as something that we need to contribute to.

(Director)

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Quality of conversational life, diversity and the holding of anxiety

A range of developmental opportunities were provided, through a variety of different exercises, that allowed conversations to be held in different ways and to create a space for different 'voices' to be heard. For example, when a constellations exercise (Abbotson and Lustig, 2005) was used to enact a physical representation of position and power it revealed the lack of impact of the service user's voice and thus helped to make visible the previously invisible.

The reflective spaces in the program, and the residential element in particular, were seen as challenging and demanding so that "*we are sizzled mentally at the end but need time to absorb*", and "*the zone of comfort has been pushed. It has challenged me and speeded up learning.*"

However, these spaces also acted as a container for anxiety (Vince, 1998) and provided a safe environment for '*authentic conversation*' to flourish:

Discussion in a non-competitive environment without any underlying agenda is key.

It's different to the usual networking [where] there's always an agenda.

The approach to evaluation served to reinforce further the sense of a safe, reflective space that facilitated diversity, new forms of conversation, and an interruption to established power relations. For example, feedback from evaluator observations and interim interviews in 'real time' demonstrated a commitment to participants' learning on the part of the commissioners and the program team; and to their own learning as well. The openness with which the evaluation was conducted encouraged participants to take risks and be open in giving and receiving their own feedback.

Participants noted the important role of diversity arising from differences in experience, organization and profession, commenting for example:

'We came with a wealth of experience and richness and were able to draw on this

to support learning. The mix was important.'

'We learned from each other, the voluntary sector, health, support services. The

expertise that was in the room!'

This valuing of diversity helped to influence participants' behavior back in the workplace as they became more accommodating of divergent and emergent views, rather than seeking to 'take control':

Diversity was not always valued, however, particularly where groupings began to form around differences and generated cliques, restricting the quality of participation and relationship. There is thus a tension between too little diversity, where opportunities for learning are limited, and too much, which can lead to fragmentation, where it can prove too difficult for individuals and groups to find sufficient common ground to engage with one another.

In this section we have outlined key themes that emerged in our findings through a complex responsive processes lens and the tensions inherent in leadership development that this approach to evaluation highlighted. In the following section we discuss the implications of these findings.

Discussion and Implications

In this paper we have argued for an approach to the evaluation that is both research *and* development. We suggest that the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, with its emphasis on engagement with the everyday conversational life of participants and other stakeholders, helps to make visible tensions and contradictions and their transformational potential (both creative and destructive). These tensions and apparent contradictions cannot be resolved. However, we can seek to hold them in 'dynamic balance' (Jarvis, 2004). In focusing on these tensions, we are paying attention to what is absent as well as what is present, to difference and diversity, and to 'the spaces in-between' that facilitate leadership as sense-making.

Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011, p. 443) suggest that established relationships, small details and everyday conversations are:

often taken-for-granted because they are viewed as common sense and therefore

unsurprising. Perhaps this explains why so little work has been done to explore

the nature of such everyday relationships.

Yet it is precisely paying attention to these everyday interactions and relationships – the micro processes of organizing (Stacey, 2003, p. 355) – that allows us to observe and work with the surprising tensions and contradiction at the heart of leadership development and its evaluation. For

ideas and conversations to take hold they have to be attended to and spoken about. What is not present or is left unspoken, or is spoken about only in the margins of the organization, tends to remain invisible and relatively unvalued (Shaw, 2002).

The following summarizes the key implications for leadership development and its evaluation arising from the study presented in this paper.

a) One of the *tensions between the 'safe' environment of the program and a competitive workplace* is the requirement for leaders in an uncertain context to struggle to escape from the constraints of heroic models of leadership (Rowling, 2011), which equate not knowing with weakness. In conceiving of organizational communication as a relational process (Cunliffe, 2009), and observing and reflecting on group processes, the evaluation helped participants to realize the potential of peer relationships as a safe space for exploring new ideas and ways of taking up leadership. Stakeholder interviews suggested that for some participants this translated into their leadership practice as they came to value and create more space for divergent and free-flowing conversation, rather than seeking to control it and close it down, facilitating a climate supportive of creativity and innovation (Fonseca, 2002).

b) In the *tension between creating increasingly valued reflective spaces on the program and an emphasis on 'action' in the workplace* participants observed that space for reflection in the workplace is typically absent or, at best, experienced as a guilty indulgence. Almost without exception participants commented on the 'busyness' in their everyday working lives. At a time when the sector is faced with unprecedented levels of change, many found themselves spending time 'fire fighting' and finding 'work-arounds' instead of thinking deeply about how to address the underlying challenges. French (2001) describes this as 'dispersal', a flight to action as a defense against anxiety. To resist the pressure to disperse energies in this way requires negative capability (Chia 2005, Simpson, French and Harvey, 2002), an important leadership capacity in environments characterized by ambiguity and unpredictability. In encouraging participants and facilitators to reflect on the insights gained from holding this tension between action and reflection, this approach to evaluation helps to highlight its importance.

c) In the *tension between the new leadership capacities and behaviors of the participants and the reluctance of some senior managers to engage with the consequent implications for change* are revealed the seeds of disappointment, frustration, envy and insecurity. Peters and Baum (2007) also

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observed this tendency to resist new leadership behaviors and capacities learned by participants on development programs. The role that this plays in inhibiting change and development is rarely discussed in the workplace except, perhaps, in conversations in the 'shadow' spaces, in the context of relationships based on high levels of trust (Stacey, 2003). The approach to evaluation described here can aid the movement of this conversational theme from the margin and into the mainstream.

d) *The tension between evaluation as research* and *development and evaluation as audit trail* is a central issue in this paper. The health and social care sectors place a strong emphasis on providing 'evidence' in support of acting differently (Chapman, 2004). We noted earlier that the commissioners, program managers and participants were acutely aware of the risks associated with abandoning a more traditional approach to establishing 'return on investment'. The approach adopted seeks to hold this tension, conceiving of evaluation as *both* research *and* development. Whilst sensemaking is a more unpredictable process than an audit trail, we have argued that by embracing and working with this tension, the approach here highlights the potential for more inclusive ways of thinking about 'evidence' (including, for example, behavioral changes, impact on morale, levels of employee engagement, reconnecting with purpose, and reframing the need for change). These are ways that are more supportive of the radical innovation and transformation the sector seeks to achieve.

Through its emphasis on the everyday conversational life of the program and its stakeholders, and by engaging with the tensions that these conversations revealed, the evaluation promoted reflection on the absent and unknown alongside the present and known. This encouraged participants to find different ways of making sense of their own leadership development and of the contribution they can make to the development of others. In particular, we suggest, it has contributed to the sense-making in the here-and-now and the prospective sense-making (Boje, 2008) that may be influential in challenging the relevance of established heroic leadership models and reframing leadership as a complex and relational process.

Conclusion and Limitations

Relational approaches and complex responsive processes theory suggest that leadership is a process of becoming and that leadership development is a contributor to the leadership journey. We

have argued from this perspective that evaluation is best viewed as not merely research but also as an integral part of the leadership development program if it is to make a meaningful contribution to our understanding of the 'return on investment'. Tensions and apparent contradictions provoke change and transformation in ways that are often unpredictable. Consequently, learning comes from unexpected places, emerging in the messy complexity of our everyday experience. In focusing closer attention on the everyday and on the quality of our inputs, we are drawn from 'busyness' to informed and responsive action, from formal (often top-down and remote) communication to free-flowing and emergent conversational themes, and from seeking to resolve tensions and be 'in control', to self-organizing constraint and embracing apparent contradiction.

We have argued that this requires an approach to leadership development as coming to know in the context of not-knowing and requires stakeholders to work with the uncertainty and anxiety that arise from embracing these tensions. This suggests another apparent contradiction: that what is absent and unknown may reveal more of our leadership development needs than what is present and apparently known. It is in this willingness to engage with and act into the unknown in the face of adversity that the scope for strengthening personal and organizational resilience may be most apparent.

Whilst our study has revealed new insights, it is not without its limitations. There is scope for future studies to use evaluation to explore the longer term sustainability of learning and behavioral change that we have noted here. Future studies could also usefully explore the everyday experience of applying learning in the workplace more fully.

We have described the application of relational approaches to the evaluation of leadership development and sought to demonstrate its value in counterbalancing the pull to heroic models of leadership with its emphasis on the everyday unfolding of organizational practices through networks of relationships. This has required a high quality of participation, relationship, conversation, and diversity from the commissioners and program managers in managing the development program as well as from the participants in engaging in it. However, we suggest that it is worth the risk as the rewards, both personal and organizational, are potentially significant in times of substantial organizational and societal challenge. As Zeldin (1995, p.466) eloquently put it:

Once people see themselves as influencing one another, they cannot be merely victims: anyone, however modest, then becomes a person capable of making a difference, minute though it might be, to the shape of reality.

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