The Leadership Dynamics of Systems Change
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Different spokes, same folks:

Leadership roles in partnerships for systems change

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Extended Abstract

This paper draws on a place-based systems change project where the authors are participating with other community stakeholders. Extant literature gives emphasis to three roles suggested to be evident in leadership in systems change. We pursue an ethnographic appreciation of how complex political contexts and the diffuse ways that these three roles become manifest and only occasionally brought to useful impact. We conclude with some implications for exploring these three roles to understand the dynamics of leadership for systems change.

Literature Review

We bridge across the leadership dynamics of systems change with the leadership literature on sustainability. While 'sustainability leadership 'and sustainable development are suggested to be problematic collocations (Bendell et al, 2018), this bridge allows a more specific normative aim for understanding the material changes that underlie often vague pronouncements of systems change. Sustainability in this regard is enacted as the central conceptual catch-all of wicked

problems such as climate change and grand challenges. However, it also supplies a conduit for 'ecological sensemaking '(Whiteman & Cooper, 2011) in the study of these leadership dynamics. In the context of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the field of sites for forming these understandings is extended from the historical view of the Global South, to be 'for all people, in all countries '(Rowlands, 2016). Thus the leadership dynamics of systems change become contested spaces for reflexive exercises in picturing politics, proximity to the poor, and how 'progress 'is conceived (Stanberry & Balda, 2023).

Although we are critical leadership scholars, our study aims to go beyond critiques of 'bad leadership practice 'to create an ethical and normative framework for leadership (Western, 2008, p. 21) that takes as foundational personhood and agency. In the development economist Amartya Sen's words:

> We...have to go beyond the role of human beings specifically as 'consumers 'or as 'people with needs', and consider, more broadly, their general role as agents of change who can—given the opportunity—think, assess, evaluate, resolve, inspire, agitate, and, through these means, reshape the world. (2013, p. 7)

In the work of Kempster and Carroll (2018), exploring the emerging debates surrounding responsible leadership, they offer an argument for both realism and romanticism acting in a complementary manner. Indeed many theories of leadership implicitly adopt idealised notions of how people should lead. For example, the idea of competencies assumes the right set of skills for leading. On the flip side, critical leadership studies   underscore the limits of competencies. These critical analyses attack the competency approach for 1) an overly reductionist view of the management role, 2) universalising the capabilities regardless of context, and 2) reinforcing traditional notions of leadership (Bolden et al, 2011, p. 79). One response to the limits of the competency approach is to re-conceive the person-centred frameworks for leadership development through collective leadership (Eva et al, 2021). Notions of collective, distributed or shared leadership give emphasis to a plurality of people engaging in leading in response to context and emerging needs. It is in this context we explore the idea of multiple roles in the leadership dynamics of systems change. We build on the ideas of Stanberry and Murphy (date?) gives prominence to three key roles that emerged in cross sector partnerships seeking to implement the SDGs:

The Convener
The Convener (Table 3 and Table 4) identifies the "practical" side of working together as the focus. This perspective considered more formal ways of organising together with attention to the partnering process itself and the immediate context, rather than systemic challenges.
The Connector
The Connector (Table 5 and Table 6) viewpoint brings attention to power and the possibilities of collaboration as empowerment. This viewpoint considers partnering to be an essentially relational process where those leading the partnership give space to others to enable a shared experience of meaning-making and shared decision-making.
The Chair

The capabilities for partnering that are most important to The Chair (Table 7 and Table 8) form a leader-centric view of collaborating with others. The Chair is unlikely to use language of power differences or to introduce conflicting notions. They bring a positive, upbeat, and motivating approach to sharing their confident views on how partnering works best. This viewpoint echoes much of the literature that describes a Western-originating heroic view of leadership.

We shall draw on these three roles as helpful to make sense of our experiences of leadership of systems change

Research Context

In the seven months of meeting together, the group, which we term the 'Hub', various people have been drawn into it and have left from it. The meeting host occupies a paid role to support her participation, but the long term reliability of that funding is in question. Thus various sub-projects have required volunteers from the often dwindling numbers of consistent participants. At one level the Hub has a clear systems change goal, 'impacting upon the wider social, economic, and environmental factors that make us healthy '(Project Document 1). The wide scope of this definition means that the whole range of stakeholders presume systems change through individual frames that are hinted at but rarely articulated. In name, the Hub project emerged from a remit to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to embed the SDGs in their organisational practise. In written description and meeting dialogues the work broadened to 1) include the addition of the local voluntary sector as a target, 2) include an aim to support social value, and 3) provide opportunities for closer working with anchor organisations.

A network of organisations brought together by the NHS commissioned the work of the Hub. This network is driven to embed locally the 'anchor organisation 'concept through placed-based alignment of SMEs .

> [Collective]   assets that can be used to support local community wealth building and development, through procurement and spending power, workforce and training, and assets such as buildings and land […]   to advance the welfare of the populations they serve.   [To] a powerful voice in where and how resources are spent and can influence the health and wellbeing of communities by impacting upon the wider social, economic and environmental factors that make us healthy.

This goal is summarised by the Hub as the broad intention to 'make a difference to local people by widening access to quality work, purchasing and Commissioning for social benefit, using buildings and spaces to support communities, reducing environmental impact, and reducing inequalities '(Project Document 1).

An entanglement of concepts, related to the public good, supports the project, and are often poorly explicated or simply not defined. These communication byways point to a shared discourse that subjectively interprets and reinterprets what would entail 'systems change 'and

what would not. These include 'community wealth building '(CITE), harnessing supply chains to provide 'social value '(CITE), and the broad aim of 'reducing environmental impact', and 'reducing inequalities'. These terms are interpreted by stakeholders including local government in various subjective and context-dependent framings both in Hub meetings and in adjacent policy support related forums. There is no explicit shared understanding of what would entail systems change is, thus the various suggestions, sub-projects, and announcements of related work are necessary for '   colouring in 'the lines of these understandings.

Conclusion

What we seek to offer in our formative paper is our ethnographic appreciation of complex political contexts and the diffuse ways that these three necessary roles or apparent necessary roles have not been manifest and only occasionally brought to useful impact.

By the time of the conference the ethnographic appreciation would have been significantly developed.   Overall we intend the paper to contribute a critique around leadership within complex systems change. Policy discourses seeking the realisation of well-being economies are becoming much more common. Governments of New Zealand, Iceland, Canada, Scotland and Wales are explicitly seeking to develop policies to realise well-being economies. At a local level, various initiatives are emerging for how this can occur (see for example: Thriving Places, and Doughnut Economic Action Lab, and Well-being Economy clusters). The climate for systems change is becoming most encouraging. However we caution that such opportunity needs to be realised through those leading being able to respond to the variety of stakeholder interests and conflicts.

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