Framing not defining – an alternative to competencies as a basis for developing leaders. Learning from GenerationQ.

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By Dr Liz Wiggins, Associate Professor, Ashridge and Janet Smallwood, Ashridge

Liz.wiggins@ashridge.hult.edu

Janet.smallwood@ashridge.hult.edu

Abstract

In this paper, we argue that the uncertainties of the current economic and organizational context create increasing anxieties for leaders and those who commission leadership development. The question - what is required to lead well? This in turn fuels the demand on leadership development consultants to provide answers, give solutions and offer expert pronouncements, thereby reducing their own needs and anxieties to meet the demands of clients (Sturdy, 1997). In such circumstances, lists of leadership competencies (Bolden and Golding, 2006) may be developed; the latest 'fashionable' offering from a leadership guru (Abrahmson, 1996; Shapiro, 1998*)* may be offered. In doing so there is a risk that as developers we are suggesting that we know best; that we can know what each leader ought to learn in order to be successful in their context. The temptation can be to offer false certainty at the very time that leaders need to learn to tolerate, embrace and lead in, and through, uncertainty. We argue that in trying to pre-define what is required of leaders, an unhelpful idealization is encouraged, implicitly suggesting that there is an identikit model of leadership to which all must conform. This leads to a focus on short comings which evokes the shadow of 'never good enough', undermining personal resilience, fuelling imposter syndrome (Clance and Imes, 1978) and perpetuating increasingly discredited models of heroic leadership (Binney, 2012) that unhelpfully emphasize an individualistic view of leadership and the 'power of one' (Gronn, 2002).

However, faced with the anxiety evoked by uncertainty, humans experience 'structure hunger' (Lapworth and Sills, 2011; Berne, 1964). As leadership developers we still need, therefore, some mechanism or framework to share and articulate our experience and to design a curriculum, without falling into the trap of prescription (Heron, 2001) and setting ourselves up as experts. Through developing a Masters in Leadership programme for Quality Improvement in the UK health system, known as GenerationQ, we have developed two constructs to frame rather than define what is required of leaders. We refer to them as leadership challenges and leadership domains. We argue that by framing (Fairhurst, 2005) what is required of leaders, rather than defining it in great detail, we give sufficient structure to hold the anxieties of leaders, leadership development commissioners and ourselves. This allows the creation of a productive and appreciative opportunity for deep learning in a zone of 'safe uncertainty' (Mason, 1993). Leaders are thus able to be in the driving seat of their own development, making choices that make sense for them and becoming more of themselves rather than fitting into someone else's idealized model. The paper ends by briefly exploring the implications of this approach for reframing the roles, expectations and relationships between leaders and leadership developers. Our hope is that the concepts of leadership challenges and leadership domains will inspire others to inform the design of any programme that acknowledges, works and learns from the complex challenges of the environment and seeks to avoid the traps of a more traditional competency-based approach to leadership development.

Key words: leadership competencies; challenges; domains; leading in complexity; health leadership

Context for leadership and learning

'NHS middle managers too comfortable to take top jobs', ran a headline in The Times (11 May, 2016), quoting research by The Kings Fund. Current NHS CEOs describe the chronic shortage of candidates for CEO roles, blaming 'ritual humiliation' of those at the top as well as Kafkaesque regulation and rising patient expectations as reasons for people not wanting

to step up to bigger leadership roles. And the problem isn't just restricted to health. Top talent was one of the three things that CEOs of global organizations worried most about in research published in the Harvard Business Review (Groysberg and Connolly, 2015). The focus on top leaders may in part be because individual leaders are often seen as disproportionately important and inextricably aligned with the fortunes of the companies they lead (Grint, 2007). As Binney et al write 'We found in our research that the heroic idea of leadership was pervasive – for leaders and followers…It exists as an idea, often an accusation, 'Here's what I – or my leader- ought to be.'' (Binney, 2012, p26).

On the one hand, being a leader offers the opportunity to influence and shape the future of an organization, accompanied by status, financial reward and personal fulfilment. At the same time, the spectacle of failure and the increase in uncertainty and complexity makes it arguably more risky and less appealing. Indeed, with the current global context now routinely characterized as a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) environment (Stiehm and Townsend, 2002), it seems appropriate to suggest that leading in the 21st century is distinctly more challenging than before. At the same time, the urgent need for leadership at all levels to help resolve some of the pressing issues facing the planet has never been greater either. This raises a number of fundamental questions:

For leaders

- If you are a leader and aspiring to do well in your current role, or to be promoted, what is required of you to be a credible leader?
- What do you need to know? How do you need to behave, to think, to make decisions, to be, as a leader?
- What developmental processes do you need to engage in to develop yourself as a leader?
- What do you need to learn and what might you need to unlearn?
- Is an MBA enough or is more required?

A century and half on from the Great Man theories of leadership, It is now generally accepted that great leaders are made, not born (Pedler, 2004; Petrie, 2014). So 'while a

child's development appears to happen automatically, adults cannot simply sit back and wait; …they need to work to keep growing' (Petrie, 2014, p6). The work of developing leaders does not just lie with leaders themselves. It is also the work of HR and Learning and Development (L&D), who are responsible within organizations for leadership development. For them too there are significant questions and uncertainties. CEOs are wanting reassurance that the leadership pipeline is well filled, that their investment in leadership development is contributing to their employer brand and helping differentiate the organization from others in the fight to recruit and retain top talent (Abrudan, 2009; Shen, 2011).

So as a commissioner of leadership development

- What are the leadership skills, behaviours and qualities you need to be encouraging?
- How do you choose wisely from all the different leadership gurus and development practices on offer?

And for those in Business Schools, and other organizations that offer leadership development, how do we decide what and how to develop future leaders? There is a considerable body of research evidence targeted at specific types of learning interventions, such as blended learning (Zandevoort, 2015), using live cases (Culpin, 2015), experiential learning (Jowitt, 2015), coaching (de Haan et al, 2004), action learning (Revans, 1988) and Action Research (King and Hind, 2015). There is also increasing research evidence on ways of encouraging learning transfer back to the workplace (Waller, 2015) and the importance of evaluation (Hayward, 2015). However, none of these specifically address the issue of how to choose the content and focus of a curriculum and, importantly, how to convey this in a way which invites the leader to be an active participant, rather than passive recipient, in their own learning.

The clamour for certainty

Complexity theorists (Stacey, 2012, 2015; Wheatley, 1994) suggest that faced with uncertainty, there can be a pull towards relative stability, a desire to retreat to what has been done before or to what is known. Those from a psychodynamic orientation (Bion, 1961, 2014) would argue that this is a natural defence against anxiety. For leadership developers this can give rise to the desire to analyse and pin down, to categorize and create typologies saying triumphantly, and with some relief, 'This is it. This is what we mean by leadership. This is the curriculum and this is how we develop it'. The response to this desire is currently manifest in three dominant approaches towards leadership development. We briefly examine all three although paper subsequently focuses on the use of leadership competencies.

1. **Competencies**. The most common approach is to develop competency based approaches to define what is required of leaders. As Pedler writes 'Leadership is a contested issue. It is much discussed and much debated, both practically and theoretically, and means different things to different people in different contexts. There is no one correct definition of leadership, or any one set of personal qualities or competencies that characterize leaders. Despite this, most approaches to leadership development are based on personal competency models and focus on the individual' (Pedler et al, 2004, p4).

2. **Gurus**. An alternative is to offer an expert solution based on a particular type or brand of leadership that is being advocated by a leadership gurus. The range of leadership labels or 'brands' currently available is extensive and includes servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2002), authentic leadership (Gardner et al, 2005), transformational leadership (Bass, 2006), charismatic leadership (Conger, 1998), clear leadership (Bushe, 2009), situational leadership (Hersey, 2004) or systems leadership (Lichenstein, 2009). These are often well researched and well written but how to choose between them? In offering one rather than another, developers can be swayed by their own preference for a particular model or the personal

preferences of the CEO or CHRO, who is commissioning leadership development work. Perhaps they have been influenced by the leadership guru's book or video or seeing him or her present (Huczynski, A.A. (1993). Whichever theory is chosen, all share the shadow side of offering the idealized pictures of successful leaders and implicitly suggest being like them is the answer. The message is 'this is how you should be'. These rarely provide guidance about what a leader needs to learn in a way that would support curriculum design or that allow a leader to make those choices for themselves in their own unique way.

3. **Gigs**. Lastly, leadership developers may be tempted to put together a smorgasbord of offerings, of 'gigs,' teaching subjects such as finance, strategy or areas of interpersonal development they know well that might feature in an MBA programme or that they feel personally comfortable with. Whilst offering interest and stimulation, such an approach will not lead to sustained, deep, transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000) which is 'the process by which we transform our taken for granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change and reflective' (p8).

The desire to offer answers and expertise in any of these three ways can, in part, be understood as a response to the demands and anxieties of those who are clients. Leaders themselves, but more specifically those commissioning and purchasing leadership development, seek reassurance that they have made a good choice. The offer and provision of leadership development is a commercial activity, with a need to win work and gain clients, as well as a scholarly endeavour grounded in research and theory so there is anxiety too for leadership developers. The anxiety of leadership developers and their clients is thus mutually reinforcing (Sturdy, 1997). The stakes are high for both sides as this is an 'insecure business' (ibid.).

Working with leadership competencies: the light and the shadow

Whilst the competency movement started in the 1960s (Bolden, 2006) a major study commissioned by the American Management Association in the early 1980s grounded the concept in behavioural and performance terms in organisations (Boyatzis, 1982). Since then the application of competencies has informed the development and practice of many consulting firms. It has also become an integral tool used by HR and L&D professionals in recruitment, promotion, remuneration, talent management and, the focus of this paper, leadership development.

Competency frameworks seek to describe underlying characteristics of individuals that determine their effective or even superior performance in role. They are often developed organisationally and seek to be bespoke to particular contexts, strategies and aspired culture and values. However, in practice, many supposed bespoke competency sets appear similar, without the uniqueness often sought by the organisation to support a distinctive strategy, value-set, culture or brand. (Bolden et al, 2003)

On the positive side, the intent is to provide transparency and be explicit about what is required of leaders and what behaviours will be rewarded. This is laudable. Used in 360 degree processes, competencies can provide leaders with helpful behavioural feedback and serve as a useful starting point for a developmental conversation. For those recently appointed into their first leadership role, the focus on developing key acquirable leadership skills represented by a specific competency can also be helpful. An example of such a competency might be the ability to give constructive feedback (Petrie, 2014).

However, the emphasis on behaviour that is describable, observable and measurable becomes harder when requirements are for the more elusive and subtle qualities and attributes required of more developed often more senior leaders in the VUCA context described. The result is often linguistic acrobatics to turn competencies into behavioural statements and to develop increasingly long 'laundry' lists of requirements in more and more detail. Alvesson (1993, p1001) describes similar challenges when trying to define what is required of knowledge workers in general: 'Formalized theoretical knowledge represents one pole; cultural, interpersonal, somatic and other forms of knowledge, together with

creative skills, represents the other. As a meaningful category, the first covers too little...the second far too much'.

On the shadow side, we argue there are four fundamental traps when using competencies for the development of leaders who are already senior and experienced.

i) Incongruence

Competencies seek to offer objectivity and fairness. They also offer a (false) promise of predictability. The message is: 'if you develop your skills and capabilities according to the behaviours and attributes prescribed, you will be a successful leader'. It is inherently incongruent to be offering such certainty and implied cause and effect when one of the key challenges of the VUCA environment is to develop the capability to thrive with uncertainty, to 'see many shades of grey, see many patterns and connections, accept uncertainty as the norm' (Petrie, 2014 p13) and to shape the future in as yet unknown ways.

By purporting to offer structure and predictability, competencies 'give a sense of boundedness (or restrictive structure) to the processes of 'management' and now 'leadership'. In doing so, 'the use of particular language can reinforce and disguise assumptions about the nature of organisational life' (Bolden, 2006, p 3) rather than opening them up to debate and critique, however unsettling that may be. Recent commentators argue that the ability to hold multiple perspectives and tolerate ambiguity is an essential capability for leading in the 21st century (Petire, 2014) but the unquestioning certainty of competencies does not encourage leaders to reconsider their very assumptions about how they understand organizations, the nature of change and the nature of power relations or to engage in double loop learning (Argyris, 1990). Thus the shadow side of offering purported certainty and prescription about what is required, as a leader, risks precluding the possibility of the emergence of novelty and new ways of thinking, organizing and acting (Stacey 2012, 2015).

ii) Idealisation

The nature of competences suggests, at least implicitly, that there is a right way of leading and being a leader. 'Perfection' is desirable, achievable and has been described in the list of competencies. Even when reframed as supporting the leader to 'find their learning edge', such an idealisation sets up an unhelpful comparison between current reality and the idealized state described. This can easily lead to individuals believing that 'they can never be good enough', particularly if their organisation culture is one that privileges deficit thinking.

> *'How many more times am I going to be told that I am still not good enough, that I still have weaknesses that I need to address before I can be objectively recognised for doing the job that I am already doing. It is so de-moralising and de-motivating and fuels self-doubt. I have to keep on looking deep inside myself to remind myself why I bother.'*
>
> *(Senior NHS leader and GenerationQ Fellow)*

This way of thinking and experiencing development, constantly being found wanting, and 'not there yet', can undermine personal resilience, and fuel imposter syndrome (Clance and Imes, 1978) where there is an unhelpful split between feeling omnipotent on one hand, and then useless on the other. It can also foster conformity to the 'identikit' model, reducing diversity in thought and action and therefore further precluding the possibility of emergent novelty.

> *'At times I feel that it is all about me, me knowing what needs to be done, me having the right answer and its exciting, and yet at other times I feel the despair and fear of being found-out, of being not good enough...when it doesn't work I feel as if I have personally failed and retreat to lick my wounds, often for long periods of time...'*
>
> *(ED Consultant and GenerationQ Fellow)*

iii) Atomization without integration

'We have broken things into parts and fragments for so long and have believed that was the best way to understand them that we are unequipped to see a different order that is there, moving the whole' (Wheatley, 1992, p 41). Atomizing leadership into a series of discrete, precisely defined competencies can make it hard to appreciate how these different elements contribute to make a leader as a whole, integrated, living, breathing person. In the same way, spreading out a set of cooking ingredients is not the same as eating and appreciating the meal. When individual competences become figural there is a risk that the richness, interconnectedness and potential of the whole person is lost. Bolden (2006) also argues that 'the subtler moral, emotional and relational aspects of leadership' also get disappeared in constructing 'an objective, measurable representation of the leader (with) competency-based approaches (even though) …. many authors would argue that it is these dimensions that lie at the heart of leadership' (p 12). What is often missing from competency models is any acknowledgement of the need to integrate these into a full human being or any process for doing so.

iv) Unconscious coercion

A further concern in the application of competencies to leadership development, is the potential use of expert power (French and Raven, 1958) in ways that limit or reduce the freedom of others, in this case leaders, to think and learn freely. In all relationships, 'we constrain each other at the same time as enabling each other and it is this paradoxical activity that constitutes power' (Stacey 2012, p 28) but what is important in the relationship between leadership developer and leader is the trap of the former using competency models to claim 'I know best or better than you what you should learn, how you should be'. Such a stance is adopting a position of 'power over' the leader. As Stacey writes 'It (coercive persuasion) seeks to foster dependency and, by definition, block questioning and reflexive thinking. It is, therefore, inimical to learning… The aim (of which) is to break down the personalities of people and reconstruct them in ways that are chosen by the most powerful' (Stacey 2012, p 80). Coercion, although perhaps unintended, precludes the emergence of an Adult-Adult relationship (Berne, 1964;

Lapworth and Sills, 2011) between leaders and developers. It sets one up as more powerful than the other rather than constructing the relationship as one of equals and co-learners. It also denies the leader the possibility of self-determination and the experience of learning to live with some not knowing which we would argue is required to lead well and safely in a VUCA context.

GenerationQ – the opportunity to think differently

In 2009 Ashridge Business School, with Unipart Expert practices, bid for and won the tender placed by The Health Foundation (www.health.org.uk) to develop a bespoke leadership programme for senior health leaders in the United Kingdom. The aim of the programme was, and continues to be, to develop senior leaders capable of leading improvements in the quality[1] of patient care. The tender was unique in that it stipulated the curriculum of the programme must hold together, in possible tension, leadership of quality improvement informed by complexity thinking and the improvement sciences and that it must be delivered by at least two organizations as they believed no one provider was equipped to offer all that leaders required. Beyond that there were no other philosophical or curriculum constraints.

To-date 90 Fellows have completed the programme and 18 are currently participating in the sixth cohort. The programme is accredited to MSc by Ashridge Business School and is 18-24 months in duration. The programme is known and branded by The Health Foundation as GenerationQ.

In this paper, we draw on our experience as a faculty team, working with six cohorts of GenerationQ. We also draw on the formal feedback gathered anonymously using an electronic survey after approximately 6 months and one-year progression into the programme, and through a final review and report to The Health Foundation after completion. In addition, the paper draws upon a formal impact evaluation study commissioned by The Health Foundation by Waller et al (2015). The study achieved a 79% response rate and was an electronic survey, supplemented by 15 one on one interviews.

[1] The underlying definition of quality is that of the Institute of Medicine (IOM) (Berwick, *2002)*

To design a new programme from a relatively blank canvas presented both a challenge and opportunity to think differently to the mainstream, specifically to design a programme which offered the possibility of learning from:

- The experience of stepping-up to address complex leadership challenges in national and local contexts
- A lightly held structure just sufficient to contain the anxiety of participating in the programme
- Working with the multiple perspectives on the faculty team with three from Ashridge, an organization steeped in the provision of Leadership development and OD consulting and two members from Unipart, an organization steeped in the practice of Quality Improvement.

Through a period of co-design with The Health Foundation, which included numerous conversations and interviews with stakeholders engaged in the quality agenda, the notion of *Leadership Challenges* and *Leadership Domains* emerged which have become the frame and curriculum guide for the programme. This paper goes on to the describe the nature, intention and detail of these two concepts and how they can be used to inform the design of any programme that acknowledges, works and learns from the complex challenges of the environment and seeks to avoid the traps of a more traditional competency-based approach to leadership development.

Leadership challenges

Synthesizing the information gathered from the stakeholder conversations and linking this to our own knowledge of research and theory, we identified six generic challenges that health leaders face when seeking to improve quality of patient care. In calling them challenges we acknowledge and build on the work of Pedler et al (2004) who write , '*challenges* …are the critical tasks, problems and issues requiring action' (p4) and later,

> *'Leadership is primarily concerned with recognizing, mobilizing and taking action in the face of critical problems and issues. In this view, leadership is defined in action, by*

what people do in the face of the challenges that they face…It is thus a performance art, measured on what we do in this situation, here and now, and not what we are or what we know…the challenges domain puts the spotlight more upon the task and the concerted effort at leadership and less upon the individual' (ibid. p6).

The GenerationQ six leadership challenge for leaders of quality improvement are presented in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1: GenerationQ Leadership Challenges

Challenge 1. Brokering sufficient multi-stakeholder participation and agreement
Challenge 2. Recognising and using the power of ambiguity and uncertainty
Challenge 3. Making informed and explicit choices about when and how to act (from the full range of possible improvement interventions)
Challenge 4. Leading others in complex change
Challenge 5. Creating the culture and conditions conducive for local improvements in quality
Challenge 6. Embodying the personal qualities that sustain self and others

The leadership challenges serve to 'speak to' leaders, to resonate with, and legitimize, their lived leadership experience whilst at the same being sufficiently generic to enable individual leaders to contextualize and make sense of them for themselves. They also serve to reassure that others are facing similar situations and to prompt reflection that certain

challenges might be being ignored or given insufficient attention, without suggesting that this is definitely the case.

> *'The leadership domains and challenges were central to me deciding to apply for GenQ. My immediate reaction was "at last, someone understands". They felt very reassuring*.' (Follow-up interview)

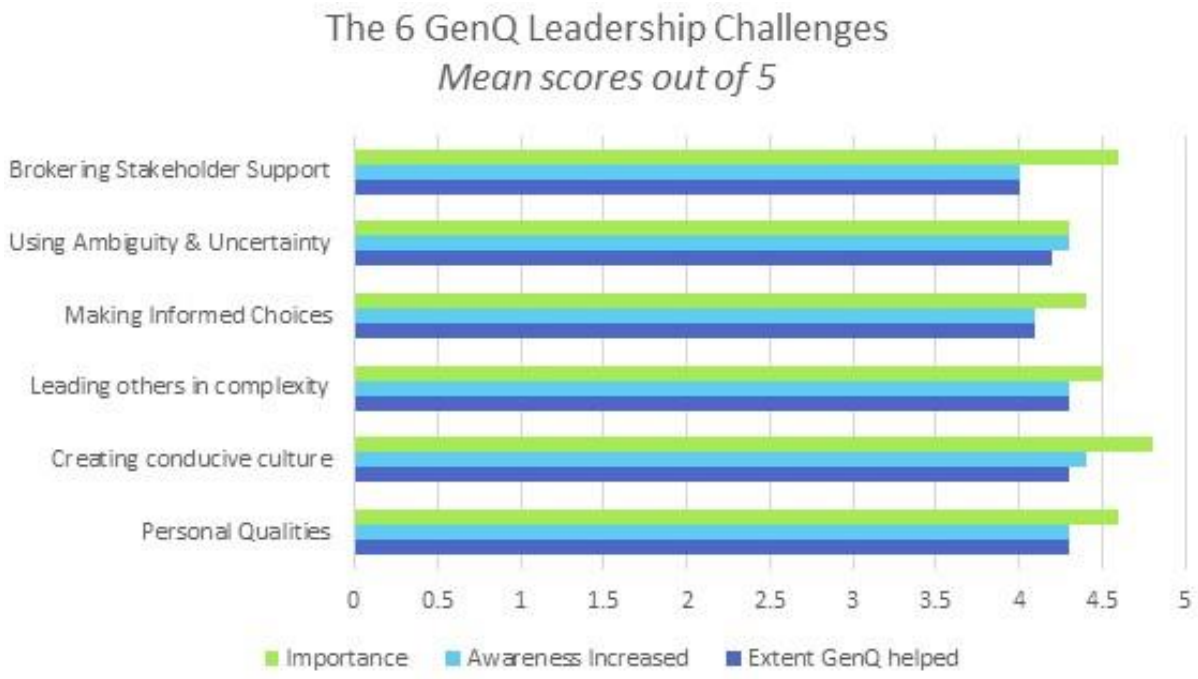
Importantly, the leadership challenges play a key part in informing the subsequent leadership domains, guide learning from action and ensure that there is a clear link between the programme and the world of leaders' work, to prevent what Petrie (2014) refers to as the frequent lack of connectivity between leadership development programmes and what goes on 'back at the ranch'.

The language and brief descriptions for each challenge are carefully considered to address the specific nature of the challenge within the health sector. For example, the first challenge, 'Brokering sufficient multi-stakeholder agreement', speaks to the need to formally, and increasingly informally, work across organisation boundaries (system leadership) and to resist the belief that everyone needs to agree, perfectly, before progress can be made. It also speaks to the current focus on clinical leadership where leaders need to navigate between professional, departmental and organizational loyalties and identities.

In the Impact Evaluation research (Waller, 2015), the six challenges were seen as highly relevant. For all six challenges, at least 86% reported to a great, or very great, extent (scoring 4 or 5 out of 5) that the challenge was important as a leader of quality improvement, that their awareness had increased and so had their skills to work with the challenge as a result of their participation in GenerationQ (Exhibit 2).
Specific comments from the evaluation research include:

> *'I feel the six challenges have covered all the difficulties in my organization'.*
>
> *'The challenges you have identified are sufficiently broad to cover the main challenges I have faced.'*
>
> *'To pull any additional ones out would dilute the impact and clarity of the six challenge framework.'*

Exhibit 2: Evaluation of 6 GenerationQ leadership challenges



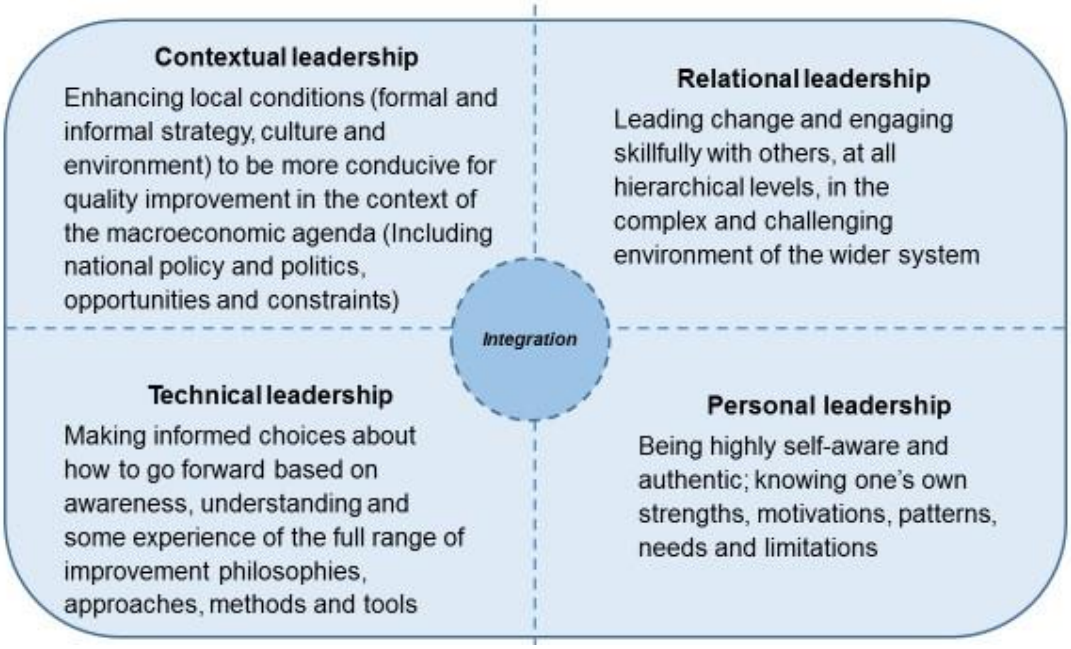
The four leadership domains

The 'four leadership domains represent the range of leadership skills, capabilities and qualities needed to be able to respond effectively to the challenges identified, recognising the full range of situational complexity,' (Waller, 2015, p 21). See Exhibit 3. They are a way of lightly framing the territories of both action and learning for leaders. They are designed to support them, enabling them to lead well and meet the challenges in their own organization or system. They are intended to frame and boundary different areas of theory, research, knowledge, skill and awareness that are likely to be useful. However, they do so without prescribing (Heron, 2001) what *must* be learnt or what *must* be done. To draw on the vocabulary of Transactional Analysis (Berne, 1964, Lapworth and Sills, 2011) the offer is made in the voice of Adult- to- Adult rather than Critical or Nurturing Parent who has assumed supposedly superior knowledge and insight. This lightness is a deliberate attempt

to move away from any temptation for potential omnipotence and assumed expert power over others that can attend leadership developers holding onto their knowledge and expertise too strongly, inviting, albeit unconsciously the trap of coercion.

The domains are offered as an indication, a sketch, a loose container to use an OD term (Bushe, 2015) rather than anything more prescribed. This lightness is very deliberate. In the face of uncertainty and anxiety, the pull towards promises of authorial knowledge and expertise can be very tempting for both leaders to demand and leadership developers to offer. However, to do so, opens up the traps discussed earlier. Rather, what is important is to provide leaders with the support and structure to work out what is useful for themselves personally in their own contexts, recognising the uniqueness of both them as an individual and the shifting nature of their context. Learning to make choices about what is important and relevant for themselves, and learning to live with, and accept, some of the uncertainties and ambiguities seem to us to be part of what is essential for leading in the 21st century.

Exhibit 3: GenerationQ leadership domains



The domains in more detail

As seen in Exhibit 3, there are four domains: contextual, technical, personal and relational. The relationships and links between them and their function together are considered below. Here, we offer an explanation of what we intend by each domain and its relevance to leadership.

i) Contextual leadership

Many leadership programmes based around competencies tend to focus on personal characteristics and skills with the result that the contextual domain is generally neglected (Pedler et al, 2004, p6). Yet, as the latter say, 'leadership is always situated: always done here, with these particular people; it is always local and contextual. Context is vital: what works here and now may not work in another place at another time.'

So by context we mean the macroeconomic, social and political environment, the stuff of PESTLE analyses (Johnson and Scholes, 1984). We also mean the specifics of sector or industry wide trends that may shape the leader's immediate environment which to some extent is always a source of uncertainty (Dawson, 1992, p 80). But we mean more than this. We mean being able to think about the very nature of organizations, organizing and organizational culture in ways that helps leaders see new possibilities for action in their own organizational context. 'Understanding context helps us bring a systemic perspective. Exploring how beliefs and assumptions lead to patterns of behaviour and how behavioural patterns reinforce beliefs and assumptions about what is possible helps clients understand the context for change (Southern, 2015, p 271). The examining of assumptions is a key element of transformational learning (Mezirow,2000).

The invitation of this domain is primarily an appeal to the head, to cognition, to thinking differently. The challenge is to probe often deeply held assumptions about 'the way things are' which can be profoundly discombobulating but can also lead to liberating ways of seeing anew, seeing new possibilities for action. For some leaders, especially those who progress to Masters level, this domain leads them to engage with different

ontologies and epistemologies and find ways of being pluralist (Marshall et al, 2016). Like Binney et al (2012), we believe that in acknowledging that context shapes results, we are not detracting from the role of leaders. Instead pragmatically, 'by recognising the importance of context, successful leaders begin to see where and how to focus their efforts' (ibid, p 62).

> '*Like experienced yachtsmen, they don't complain about the weather or deny its significance. They don't see the weather as 'the problem' and themselves as 'the answer'…. They study conditions intently and are knowledgeable about the fine detail of the performance of their boats and crews and their achievements under a range of circumstances. They recognise that sometimes there is little they can do to move forward but they are ready to move quickly when opportunities present themselves. They are ready for storms and they know they will get through them. They don't try to conquer the conditions but think about where and how they can harness winds, tides and currents to take them where they want to go*.'

ii) Technical leadership

This domain recognizes and acknowledges the importance of expertise or technical specialty. This can be an important source of credibility (Maister, 1997) and legitimacy for leaders and will vary by sector, profession or role. In the case of GenerationQ, which was established as a leadership programme for developing leaders of quality improvement, this is the domain where quality improvement (QI) methods were explored, as was the good use of data and metrics. However, a challenge for leaders within this domain is recognizing when they need to relinquish some of their desire to know and to be expert which has perhaps served them well as managers or, in the health context, as clinicians before they progressed into also occupying leadership roles.

In a leadership role, more often what is required is knowing enough to ask good questions and to be able to delegate effectively without needing to be the technical

expert themselves. Leaders who are unable to do this often stifle their own ability to lead, causing paralysis and stuckness (Fisch et al, 1974) in their part of the organization.

Learning to be comfortable with 'good enough' knowledge can be profoundly unsettling. It requires allowing others to hold that space rather than using their own expert knowledge to dominate others, to exercise power over them. It also requires letting go of the certainty that often appears to reside with the assumption of having a 'toolkit'. While much of the technical domain is thus cognitive, being able to notice the pull towards the certainty offered by expertise and technical specialism in this domain is highly personal and emotional. Learning to lead without deep expertise can, for some, evoke the need to work with and confront their sense of imposter syndrome, often requiring significant support.

iii) Personal leadership

The personal domain is the area where most competency based leadership development programmes tend to focus (Pedler et al, 2004). This is in part a continuing legacy of the Great man theory of leadership where personal characteristics and attitudes were deemed to be essential. It is also an area where psychometrics such as MBTI, the Hogan instrument and FiRO-B are used to provide labels and insights into the self and how the individual may differ from and impact others. However, whilst useful for personal development, more is required for the development of leaders. In our experience on GenerationQ, a deeper self-awareness and self-acceptance is required that goes beyond psychometrics into more personal psychology, working at the level of family scripts (Berne, 1964) and personal drivers (Kahler, 1975). This is because leading, particularly during times of uncertainty and anxiety, invites transference, counter transference and projection which requires leaders being aware enough of their own patterns, defences and triggers so that can recognize what is 'their stuff' and what is other people's. This is essential for staying psychologically safe and grounded, and for resilience. This is the self-knowledge that allows leaders to reach out and stay connected with others. On GenerationQ the provision of coaching supports the learning in this domain and is vital.

iv) Relational Leadership

Leadership is a collective not a solo endeavour. It requires connecting with, and engaging with, others. Without others, without followers, there is no leader, no leading, no leadership (Kellerman, 2007). In some case the enactment of leading may be in a dyad with one other person; in others it may be in a team or group setting; it may be a much larger scale than that. With scale, the relationality becomes less personal but the intent to engage with and recognize the essential humanity and personhood of others remains. We see the relational domain is being one that has relevance for leaders in any sector.

In the context of this domain we offer a wide range of theories and frameworks, some potentially contradictory, so that individuals can choose what is meaningful and makes sense to them. Key theories and frameworks that have proved useful include creating conditions for dialogue (Isaacs, 1999), for understanding change as planned and emergent, (Wiggins and Hunter, 2016; Myers et al, 2012), changing conversations (Shaw,2002), understanding the importance of gesture and response (Stacey, 2001, 2012, 2015) and working well with power and politics (Buchannan and Boddy, 2005).

Much of the learning about relational practice emerges from reflecting upon the experience of being part of the GenerationQ cohort. In that sense it requires us, as developers and facilitators, to fully embrace the role of 'powerful participant' (McCandless, 2009) and to work with the dynamics of the group as they unfold.

Working with the four domains

Our intention in offering the four domains is to be eclectic, inclusive, respectful and valuing of all four, recognising that the art of leadership requires all four to be woven together in almost every gesture of leadership. Whilst each domain has a particular focus, putting the spotlight on certain aspects of leading, there is no intended hierarchy between them or intended suggestion that they can be useful apart from each other. As Adair describes his

own model of task, individual and team, 'We have no option ... but to think of them as a whole. Not as a chemical mixture but as a compound' (Adair 2005, p3). The importance of holding together, of integration, is evidenced in the evaluation research and follow-up conversations:

> *'The domains are remarkably enduring. They have stayed with me through a transition from NHS to running my own business…… They're like a jigsaw puzzle; remove one piece and the picture is incomplete. Each one helps to make sense of the whole.*' (Follow-up interview)
>
> *'The domains created a much more rounded, mature approach. They provided a language to communicate improvement as both a directed process and an emergent property, and encourage respect for both. As such they enable you to relate equally with people who prefer technical/structure as well as those that respond better to a relational/emergent approach.'* (Follow-up interview)
>
> *'GenerationQ has helped me value more the time spent building relationships and to get a better balance between 'doing the technical job' and 'doing the relational work well'. Prior to GenerationQ I was overly reliant on being a good technical change / QI leader'.* (Evaluation report, Waller, 2015, p 25)

In the detailed design of GenerationQ we strive to emphasise the importance of integration and of seeing and working with the whole person. For example, in the residential workshops (known as Leadership Fora) we deliberately choose to acknowledge and work with multiple domains simultaneously, even if there might be a particular focus. In the final written assignment[2] participants are invited to write a deeply reflective piece which weaves together and represents their own personal learning for each domain in a Personal Leadership Statement.

However, we recognize certain traps and potential shadow side of working with the domains, particularly the trap of polarisation and splitting. Some leaders on the programme

[2] Participants have the option to study for the awards of Postgraduate Certificate, Postgraduate Diploma or MSc. This final assignment is completed by all those continuing to Diploma or Masters.

felt that even though the attempt was to hold the four domains together there was a risk of polarizing.

> '*Don't like it seemingly framed as an alternative type of leadership – relational rather than technical. I appreciated the framing was 'and' but I think it is very easy for this to become 'or'*. (Follow-up interview)

Those who were already expert in the use of improvement methods and fully aware that effective use requires, in particular, excellent relational skills rejected the placing of specific QI methodologies in the technical domain, whilst acknowledging the pragmatism.

> *'Still think very pragmatic way of organising it. Though question more robustly if 'technical' leadership is really different from 'relational' leadership – or if actually they are just different 'interventions' that are framed differently/emphasise different elements, with different lenses, along a continuum.*' (Follow-up conversation)

We are also learning about the importance of language and labelling, with some leaders believing that the use of the word *technical* implies an implicit hierarchy in the four domains, with technical leadership having a lower status than the other three. This requires further inquiry on our part to understand why and how this meaning is attributed to the use of the word.

Thinking ahead

Our intention in writing this paper has been to share the learning from GenerationQ, particularly in relation to the use of Leadership Challenges and Domains as a lightly held frame. Our hope is that they will be useful for leadership developers embarking on the design of leadership programmes for all sectors, not just health. One of the great paradoxes of working with the challenges and domains is that their very simplicity appears to be the source of their strength and appeal. As Isaac Newton is quoted as saying 'Nature is pleased with simplicity. And nature is no dummy,' and as Einstein went onto say, 'Make everything as simple as possible, but not simpler.'

The notion of Leadership Challenges we see as relevant for all sectors, requiring a process of inquiry with key stakeholders to identify and articulate the specific challenges most pressing and relevant for any given sector.

The four leadership domains we see as similarly useful:

- Contextual leadership we see as requiring some sector specific knowledge and awareness as well as the generic need to surface and understand assumptions about organisations and organising.
- What constitutes technical leadership will differ by sector and role and, potentially, the aims of the programme. The development of the ability to let go of the security of deep technical knowledge we imagine is the same for all leaders, regardless of sector.
- Relational and personal leadership we see as essential for leaders from any sector although relational leadership might need acknowledgement of key stakeholders, for example patients and carers when working in health.

Building upon the concept of working with challenges and domains, our hope is that others will be able to achieve the impact we have had and continue to experience with GenerationQ. In the evaluation research (Waller, 2015) participants were very positive about their experience with a mean satisfaction score of 9.7 out of 10 and an overwhelming majority (92.7%) indicating they were very likely to recommend the programme to others. There was also a statistically significant difference in participants rating of their ability to improve the quality of patient care before and after their participation in the programme, a rise from a mean score of 2.98 (SD = 0.93) to 4.16 (SD= 0.83) after the programme. As a participant from an early cohort cites about their personal experience of participating:

> *"Immeasurable and huge. I would not be in my current role, I would not have my current understanding of organisations, influence, power and politics, and I would not be looking at the wider healthcare picture and considering how I can improve that. I feel that I am in a completely different position personally and professionally*

than I would have been without Generation Q and am immensely proud and grateful to have been a part of it."

Of course it would be naïve and inappropriate for us to suggest that the impact of the programme has been achieved solely through the use of the challenges and domains, although we do believe them to have been crucial. We are also learning about the importance of taking a pluralistic stance, the importance of being appreciative and affirming as well as challenging, and how challenging (and rewarding) it is to reframe the role of developer from that of expert bystander to active participant in the learning process. Each of these themes will be examined in future publications.

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