The frontline: a new focus for learning about leadership

Dr Nita L Cherry, Swinburne University of Technology, examines aspects of effective frontline leadership under conditions of complexity and its value in developing the understanding of contemporary leadership. ®

ABSTRACT

Are there new lessons to be learned from frontline leaders and teams who regularly work under conditions of emergency and complexity? Commentators have observed that much existing leadership thinking in the management literature has been preoccupied with the contributions and capabilities of upper and middle managers in corporate settings. By drawing on contemporary thinking and some recent data about leadership in emergencies and at the frontline, this paper highlights the contributions that the sector can make to the understanding of 21st Century leadership more generally. But it also suggests some ways in which frontline leadership might usefully be refreshed if it is to withstand the relentless pressure of working in that complex space.

Introduction

In his review of Maclean's (1992) book *Young Men and Fire*, Weick (1996) paints a vivid and terse word picture of the Mann Gulch fire that killed 13 fire fighters in Montana in 1949. In Weick's words:

> ... the episode illuminates problems facing corporate leaders. Increasingly, corporate work unfolds in small, temporary outfits where the stakes are high, turnover is chronic, foul-ups can spread, ... the unexpected is common ... and organisations ... are susceptible to sudden and dangerous losses of meaning... When the noise created by wind, flames and exploding trees is deafening and the temperature is approaching a lethal 140 degrees, and when relative strangers ... are struck out in a line, people can neither confer with a trusted neighbour nor pay close attention to a boss who is unknown and whose commands make no sense whatsoever. As if these obstacles were not enough, it is hard to make common sense when each person sees something different – or nothing at all – because of the smoke (Weick 1996, pp. 143-144).

This picture of practice and leadership at the front line is a vivid depiction of operational complexity. It is a powerful prompt as to why it is timely and helpful to turn to the front line for guidance about the theory and practice of leadership fit for our times.

Many commentators have pointed out that contemporary life and work poses complex challenges for individuals, organisations and communities (Stacey 1992, Barnett 2012, Briggs 2007) as dimensions of contemporary life, work and leadership. This complexity plays out nationally and globally through the rapid mobility of people, money, diseases, goods and services across the world. The nature of national or community identity, borders and security, needs to be rethought when technology and transport make most systems accessible and increasingly transparent.

Surveillance systems provide an excellent example of what Perkins (1999) has called 'troublesome knowledge': knowledge that has profound social advantages that comes at considerable social cost. These global trends are not just large-scale abstractions. Local communities and organisations must wrestle with complex dilemmas that are unresolvable and won't go away. This happens when issues involve many different stakeholders whose needs and priorities are so different that they cannot be reconciled. It happens when actions inevitably produce unwanted and negative consequences for some people while benefiting others; or surprising outcomes that fix one problem but create others that are worse. Ignoring such issues simply displaces them or postpones them but they do not go away, they may appear in new forms and get worse. Creating safe and sustainable suburbs on the fringe of very large cities is a case in point. What works in terms of the built environment might be at odds with the natural environment. Another is building health and education systems that are affordable and accessible for those who use them but are also safe and desirable places to work.

Briggs (2007) suggests that when communities and constituencies start to accept the consequences of complexity as common-place and inevitable there are even more pervasive dangers and opportunities. The opportunities are that individuals have access to more data than at any previous time in history. They have more opportunities than ever before to create

new pathways for the creative and constructive use of human imagination. The dangers are that they will become resigned to chronic failures of government policy, will not expect corporations and universities to develop and implement truly sustainable ways of doing difficult things, and will not take up their own responsibility to live and work as wisely as they can.

Stacey (1992) has observed that under conditions of complexity, many leaders shorten their timeframes, lower their ambitions and simplify their thinking in order to cope. Educational thinkers like Briggs (2007) argue that life and work at the front line of organisations in situations of complexity requires levels of skill and attentiveness that need deliberate cultivation through the school and higher education systems. The same can be said of leadership at the front line. Many of those who lead frontline teams must be able to contain the anxiety of teams that know whatever they do, there will be people with legitimate needs and voices who will be disadvantaged. These teams must be able to engage every day with issues and problems for which there is no definitive fix, and sometimes not even an obvious method of engagement. And they need leadership practices that can help them do that.

Learning from leadership at the front line

Lipsky (1980) has noted the high probability that street-level leaders will either drop out or burn out. To stay effectively engaged requires sustainable ways of coping with the dilemmas of their work, and such coping frequently involves the lowering of their expectations and ideals. Frontline leaders come to face a professional dilemma of their own: to significantly grow their leadership confidence and skills in proportion to the challenges faced, or to regress in the face of them. Genuine complexity is not a space where one can simply mark time. It is not a place for the status quo. In turn, the way in which they engage with the dilemma of 'grow or regress' creates the container or context in which their teams also practice. As a result:

> … it is understandable that some view paradoxical complexity as posing the fundamental challenge of our age for sustainable practice, leadership and education (Bowden & Marton 1998, Barnett 2012). How are people to be prepared for front line practice in organisations of all kinds, whether in the commercial, government or not-for-profit sectors? How are their leaders and organisations going to assist and sustain them? Does our understanding of front-from that which seems to dominate thinking about executive leadership? And where might we turn for helpful insight when considering these questions? (Cherry 2013 p. 9).

Yet the existing management literature on leadership is not as helpful as it might be. Rowley and Gibbs (2008) have argued that this literature is still dominated by mid-20th Century models of leadership that focus on command and control from the top down in corporate settings. De Church *et al.* (2010), having looked

systematically at the results of 25 years of leadership research, concluded that it has mostly centred on individual leaders right at the top of organisations. Relatively little attention has been paid to studying the leadership of teams and units at the front line. In a similarly comprehensive study, also covering 25 years of publication and published very recently, Van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) were very critical of not only the preoccupation of that literature with executive leadership, but with the poorly-developed theorising it offers.

These observations are further reasons to look at what can be learned from frontline leadership. This is not a novel suggestion, having been put forward by Lipsky (1980) over 30 years ago in his exploration of street-level bureaucracy, and revisited by him more recently (2010). Although marginalised in the management literature, Lipsky's perspective drew attention to the role played by people who work in front-line roles in public administration, including those of front-line leadership. These are people who have significant discretion in making decisions about who can access public money and resources, what is lawful behaviour, when penalties and sanctions are to be applied and what is to be done in emergencies. Dilemmas and complexities that can't be resolved at the level of public policy and strategy must be dealt with, often on the basis of individual circumstances, in particular contexts, day after day. But often this must be done on the basis of limited information and in isolation from others. Frontline practitioners and leaders use wide discretionary powers and must exercise considerable judgment in circumstances that seriously affect the lives of individuals, families and communities:

> I argue that the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out (Lipsky, 2010, p. xiii).

More recently, Weick (1993, 2012) and Perez (1997, 2011) have suggested that frontline work in policing and emergency services is so complex that it is unique in its complexity and has many lessons for those who want to effectively lead in the complexity of the 21st Century. In interviews with 50 serving police officers in Melbourne, Cherry (2013) explored perceptions of the experience of working in multicultural communities formed as a result of the displacement and mass migration of people from other countries and cultures. This study vividly illustrated, through first-hand accounts, the dilemma-filled complexity of every day police practice and leadership at the frontline. It specifically operationalised the paradoxes of policing identified by Perez (1997), concluding that frontline leadership in this context requires deliberate, persistent concentration and effort. This is consistent with Lipsky's (2010) assessment that such complexity sets up the conditions in which leadership cannot be enacted on automatic pilot or become reliant on acquired techniques that are used as a matter of habit. This is a leadership role that requires unwavering attention and alertness.

Weick's (1996) contribution, which introduced this paper, went on to highlight some key insights into frontline leadership in emergency situations. Some of these reinforce the importance of attentiveness, but also stress the importance of studying where people habitually direct their attention and what sorts of things drive that. For example, what 'markers' do they normally seek out to form a view of a situation? What short cuts do they take? What does it take to override that habit or distract the person from their normal scanning patterns? And what does it take to disrupt them to make them think again, or think differently, about what they are seeing? Weick's point is that making sense of things is what human beings naturally want to do, but they will generally rely on familiar and habitual ways of doing it. Even if the familiar and habitual cues are no longer reliable, or even dangerous, people under pressure will fall back on entrenched routines of observation and judgement.

When there are no familiar cues, or the old rules and structures are clearly not working, something even worse can happen. It is that situation of complexity that can be very instructive about the skills required of effective frontline leadership. Unlike the boardroom, where it is generally possible to work with timeframes of weeks, months or years, under the pressures of frontline complexity questions like: what is our vision? what is our strategy? who are our stakeholders? are not front-of-mind. Instead, teams and leaders can be focused on the anxiety — even fear — that results when the data available to work with are new, or contradictory, or missing. In these circumstances the familiar techniques that give people a sense of mastery and control can become irrelevant, even useless, unless used in a different way. Under pressure, members of teams and their leaders might find themselves isolated from each other and unable to communicate in the usual ways, or working with strangers with whom they have no history of trust or relationship. With the loss of data, tools, structure, relationships and communication, can come the ultimate losses—those of role and identity. When there are no leaders, roles or routines, the usually clear sense of who I am, what I can do, how I can influence things, can be challenged, at least temporarily. They may no longer trust their own judgment or be resourceful or experimental in the ways they usually are. According to Weick (1996),

> 'Talking about Mann Gulch at a distance of nearly 50 years enables us to glimpse vulnerabilities that lie much closer at hand. To grapple with those vulnerabilities and design our way around them is not an exercise in rationality and decision making. Instead, it … requires a closer look at the social context in which sense making creates the decisions that people think are so crucial. Mann Gulch teaches us that the real action occurs long before decisions ever become visible. By the time a decision needs to be made, sense-making processes have already determined its outcome. That's why … we need to design structures that are resilient sources of collective sense making' (p. 148).

Weick's advice is that the work of leadership at the front line is to actively build the social infrastructure in advance that is needed to ameliorate the critical losses that can rob people of their sense of competence and confidence. Of critical importance, he suggests, is the development of strong communication channels through what he refers to as *nonstop talk* (1996, p.148). This is the idea that leaders will build trust and relationship through regular direct two-way communication that is both formal and informal.

However, this *nonstop talk* serves an even deeper purpose. In times of crisis, communication channels are often cleared for what is considered essential communication, and communication is limited to terse, formal and often coded exchanges. This process works well when that communication still enables people to make helpful sense of their circumstances. When it doesn't, and confusion and anxiety take hold, it is often the case that one or other parties stops communicating because they literally no longer have a language to describe what is happening. The absence of communication then makes it even more difficult for those involved to help each other. When communication no longer carries the means to help people make sense of things, then the losses of functionality start to emerge. These include:

- having the capacity to pay deep attention to whatever can still be seen and heard

- having the ability to remain open and curious

- being confident to work resourcefully when needed (intelligent improvisation)

- being able to listen to others long enough to take in what they are saying, and

- being able to report one's own observations in ways that others can understand and use.

There are a number of things that frontline leaders can do to build the kinds of group and individual capabilities that can withstand the pressure of complexity. Protocols that build the habit of constant talk are commonly used in retail settings at the beginning and end of trading days and operational de-briefs that use dumb-smart questions are powerful ways of doing 'no-blame' reviews of processes, outcomes and learning from successes and failures. Less commonly used, but equally powerful, are coaching exercises that train people to describe what they are seeing, not what they *think* they are seeing, to 'look again' and check their first impressions, and to use plain, concrete language to describe what they have not seen before.

Talking and listening are central skills for these capabilities. Weick's (2012) later work has developed the idea that for teams and leaders to communicate under conditions of complexity, keen attention is required to the language that is regularly used to indicate when a situation is becoming hard to handle and when an individual might be losing confidence and functionality. Teams and individuals who constantly work under pressure develop short hand forms of language where single words or phrases carry a very

large shared meaning. The problem with constantly communicating in such terse ways is that meaning that was once rich becomes stripped from the words until only a very thin version is available. That in turn means that important information is no longer shared, heard or acknowledged. The missing information might include fundamental thoughts and feelings such as 'I don't know what to do', 'I'm uneasy', 'I'm concerned', 'I'd like to know what you think', 'I really need your help here'. A key skill for frontline leaders is being able to recognise clipped language cues that reveal states of mind and attention that are not communicated more directly or in other ways. This understanding of front-line leadership goes well beyond a narrow model of work allocation and performance review to a framing of it as developing core organisational capabilities through the coaching of specific individual and team skills in making sense of things.

Conclusion

This paper has asked what can be learned from effective frontline leadership under conditions of complexity that will be of value in developing the understanding of contemporary leadership more generally. It has highlighted some dimensions of frontline leadership practice that can easily be taken for granted by experienced operational leaders. But the real challenge for experienced frontline leaders is to be alert and deeply attentive to cues, both subtle and stark, that teams and individuals are being tested in zones of uncertainty and complexity which have the power to make them regress or grow but will not allow them to stand still.

The way this work is done is going to be different in different kinds of settings. In some professions, people become very proficient at reading the subtle cues that tell them whether today is going to be a good day or a bad one for the team. But most of us are not mind readers and it is often necessary to put in place some protocols that the whole team can use.

Quick check-ins are a very common way of doing this. Without making a big deal of it, the simple question 'What's front of mind for you right now?' provides a professional way of checking-in and doing much of what Weick (1996) meant about the structures that are resilient sources of collective sense-making.

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Professor Cherry works with Dr Peter Hayward, Program Coordinator, Master of Management at Swinburne University. Dr Hayward is presenting on Strategic Foresight at *Connection! 2014*, 14-18 July at the Australian Emergency Management Institute, Mt Macedon. See page 67 for more details and registration.

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