



PSDP–Resources for Managers of Practice Supervisors: What kind of leader am I? Understanding different styles of leadership

Introduction

Leaders are under unprecedented scrutiny. Our trust in them is at an all-time low. Leaders report they are accountable for results and yet perhaps not always in control of them (Stokes and Dopson, 2020). In a fast-changing world that's often uncertain and unpredictable, leaders are obliged to try and make sense of the contexts people work in, and to support them and their organisations in responding effectively. This is a challenging task that requires a rich and varied set of skills and capabilities.

Understanding the centrality of diversity, inclusion and equality, and the impact of structural inequalities, is also key to leading and delivering services that reflect and meet the needs of diverse communities. Children's workforce data (Department for Education, 2019) shows that while the 'frontline' social work workforce is moderately diverse, this becomes less and less true as people move into more senior roles.

There is a lot of widely available information about leadership styles and techniques, which can be overwhelming. And much of what we think about leadership and how we behave as leaders is informed by implicit knowledge rather than something we have learned or examined in more detail.

This tool aims to help you reflect on:

- > what you know about leadership
- > what makes you the kind of leader you are
- > how you can enhance the way you take up your leadership role to best effect.

It also encourages you to expand your thinking about different leadership approaches and to consider how you can vary the way you lead depending on need and context. There are a number of reflective tasks for you to work through, to help you develop your skills and approaches, which you can complete in one sitting if it suits you to do so. Or, you may want to complete the activities in stages as time allows.

Different models of leadership relevant to children's social care

Drawing on Dr Simon Western's thinking about discourses of leadership (2009) we will explore the relatively recent concept of eco-leadership and link this to recent thinking emerging from research with leaders, conducted by the Said Business School at Oxford University (Stokes and Dopson, 2020).

Eco-leadership recognises our interdependence and focuses on making, sustaining and supporting connectivity within organisations (i.e. between teams, specialisms, departments and their wider contexts) and with external partners and stakeholders, as well as the towns, boroughs, cities and communities in which they are situated. Eco-leadership emphasises thinking about whole systems and what leadership approaches are best for which tasks.

We situate our discussion of this within Haworth, Miller and Schaub's consideration of leadership in social work (2018). They argue that distributed, adaptive and compassionate leadership styles align best with social work values, and these concepts and theories link well with an eco-leadership approach.

Distributed leadership is about recognising that all leaders are incomplete and leadership is not a solo sport. It requires a letting go of the 'myth of the complete leader' and embracing our strengths while leveraging others, as needed. This then allows the leader to operate in their best leadership capability while engaging and promoting others in theirs (Ancona et al., 2007).

Adaptive leadership (Heifetz and Linsky, 2009) is a practical leadership framework that

helps individuals and organisations to adapt to changing environments and effectively respond to recurring problems. An adaptive leadership framework can help when there are no easy solutions, and it supports leaders to make changes based on a diversity of viewpoints in complex working environments.

There are four dimensions that adaptive leaders keep in mind:

- > navigating complex environments
- > leading with empathy
- > learning through self-correction and reflection
- > creating win-win solutions.

Compassionate leadership, as developed in health care leadership in practice, means leaders:

- > listen with fascination to those they lead
- > arrive at a shared understanding of the challenges they face
- > empathise with and care for the people they lead
- > take action to help or support them.

(West, et al, 2017)

Compassionate leadership creates a culture that makes it possible to have difficult conversations when necessary, and ensures a collective focus and a greater likelihood of collective responsibility for the delivery of high-quality services to children and families.

Activity one

This first activity encourages you to start thinking about yourself as a leader. Who you pick as the leaders you think of and admire will inevitably impact on how you take up your own leadership role – our leadership style is influenced by the leaders we observe. Understanding yourself and really knowing about your own journey into leadership is important. It helps to ensure you are deploying the best leadership style to achieve the task.

Spend a few moments considering the following questions and make a note of your answers:

- > When you think about leadership, who do you think about?
- > Which world leader comes to mind?
- > What connection do you have to their leadership style?
- > Who do you model yourself on?
- > Are there any ways in which gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, disability, culture and religion influence your thinking about leadership?
- > What leadership styles do you know about, admire and / or practice?

Activity two

Leadership is about making choices but:

- > What *don't* you know about leadership? You may draw on role models or have learned about some leadership approaches that work for you, but what else are you curious about?
- > Are you missing some approaches and techniques that might help you to be a better leader?
- > Are there some leadership approaches that you dismiss or reject but don't really know much about?
- > How might this limit your practice?
- > What is your default style and when is it helpful? When does it get in the way?
- > What is the impact of the way you lead and experience leadership on diversity and inclusion? For example, what do team members see as your leadership strengths in relation to diversity, equality and inclusion? How open are you about the impact of the different aspects of your identity (in terms of age, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, disability, etc.) on the way you lead?
- > What is helpful overall about your leadership approach?
- > When might it be more challenging?

Introducing four leadership discourses

The discourses of leadership

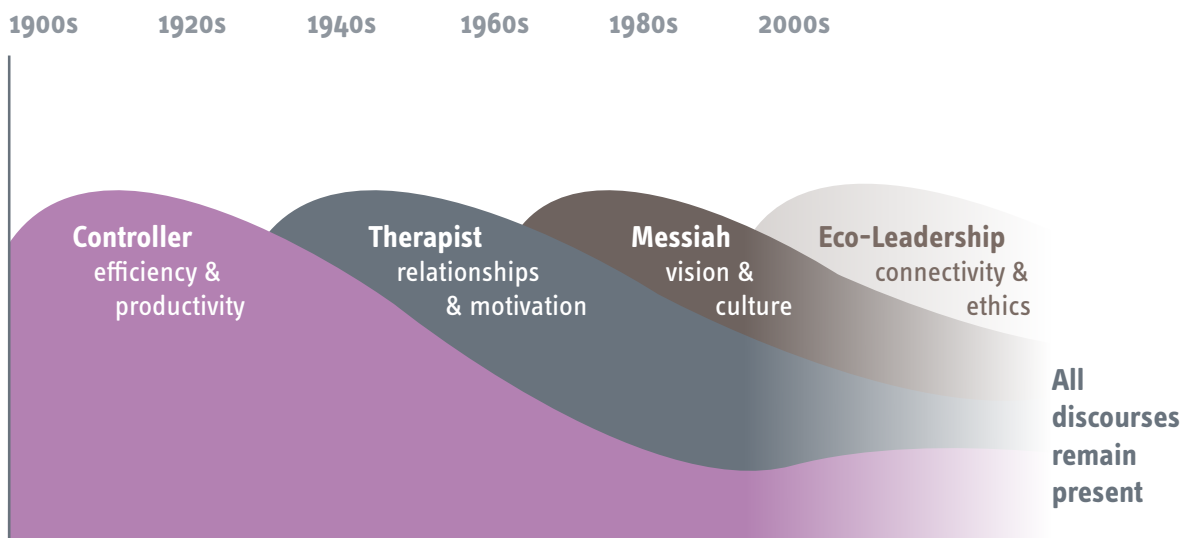


Figure 1: The discourses of leadership (Western, 2009)

For many people, a leader is an heroic charismatic figure, but there are other discourses of leadership. A discourse is an underlying set of assumptions that becomes accepted as the norm and affects and shapes our views about something. A discourse determines what can and cannot be said. It impacts on our views and self-perceptions – it's impossible to escape discourse.

Have a look at figure 1, which shows the four leadership discourses framework developed by Western (2009). These are:

- > Controller.
- > Therapist.
- > Messiah.
- > Eco-leadership.

These discourses, developing, overlapping and mapping the progression of western leadership approaches and theory through the 20th and 21st centuries, influence the way we think about and practice leadership alongside our own life experiences.

Recently, the discourses have been used to research how leadership approaches differ across the globe, analysing data from different countries to find out how they play out in each (Western and Garcia, 2018). The findings show that the four discourses present themselves according to a country's history, political and economic circumstances, and cultural background.

Western argues that these four interact with each other, either in an integrated, dynamic and positive way, or in a disruptive and dysfunctional way. They work largely beneath our conscious awareness, influencing how we think about leadership and who we are as leaders and followers.

All four discourses are present in all organisations (and in each individual and team to different degrees). They impact on how work is structured, and they blur and mix together. The task for managers / leaders taking up an eco-leadership approach is to try to get the balance of the leadership discourses right to meet the needs of a particular task in their particular context. The following example demonstrates what this means in practice.

Eco-leadership example – children’s social care services

Running effective children’s social care services means ensuring the right balance between:

Controller

Keeping appropriate control of resources and finances and making sure everyone is task-focused, that the data is good, that targets are being met, and that people have clear roles and boundaries.

Therapist

The organisation is relational and communicating well, it is people-focused, and individuals and teams are engaged and motivated.

Messiah

A clear vision and purpose for the organisation exists, with a strong organisational identity and culture.

Eco-leadership

People are well connected and the organisation is sharing best practice and knowledge. Leadership is distributed and employees feel autonomous and free to act. Attention is paid to external factors that impact on the organisation, and an understanding exists of the inter-dependencies both within it and across the sector. Ethics are a central concern.

Having read the example above, please now have a think about the following questions in relation to your own work as a leader.

Activity three

- > Which of the four leadership discourses do you think are best suited to social work, and which combination delivers the best results?
- > Should your team / organisation have a dominant therapist leadership approach, or eco-leadership?
- > Which other leadership approaches / discourses are important to deliver success?
- > Thinking about your work context, how can the four discourses be aligned and integrated to get the best balance of leadership, drawing on the strengths and acknowledging the challenges of each different discourse / approach?

What does this mean for our leadership practice?

How we think about leadership determines how we practice it. Our perceptions define how we understand organisational dynamics, how ambitious we are, what our purpose is, and perhaps most importantly, how our organisation or part of the organisation engages and mobilises its staff to maximise their talent, commitment and potential.

For example, if our shared perceptions and expectations of leadership mirror a 'controller' approach, with its associated authoritarian tendencies, there is little chance that middle leaders will be able to show their initiative, take creative risks or develop their talent and take up distributed leadership roles.

More likely, they will spend time blaming the bad leaders 'upstairs' and absolving themselves of responsibility for changing things. Or, if there is a charismatic 'messiah' leader, this may initially inspire staff to follow their visions but may also create a dependency culture, with followers waiting to receive instructions or 'a message' from their messiah of a leader.

It is important to maintain perspective. This is not about good or bad leadership but about noticing approaches that work for the time, place and task, and thinking about what might be limiting your efforts either individually or as a team / service or organisation.

Developing my leadership repertoire

This next activity invites you to reflect on what you know and what you need to find out more about, and what changes you might need or want to make as you develop as a leader.

Activity four

- > Have I got the right balance of knowledge about different approaches to achieve what I need?
- > Am I thinking about leadership in ways that limit me, my team, service or organisation?
- > What more do I need to know about different leadership approaches?
- > How can I change the way I use different leadership approaches to impact on the delivery of our services and my team?

Exploring the qualities of the four leadership discourses

In this next section, we will think further and in more detail about the four leadership discourses. Take a look at figure 2 below, which summarises the key qualities of each type of leadership.

The four qualities of controller leadership	The four qualities of therapist leadership
<i>'Efficiency through control'</i> > Efficiency > Task and target focus > Clear systems, roles, processes and structures > Scientific rationalism	<i>'Happy workers are more productive workers'</i> > Self-awareness > Relational dynamics > Coaching skills > Developmental focus
The four qualities of messiah leadership	The four qualities of eco-leadership leadership
<i>'Charismatic leaders and strong cultures'</i> > Charisma and influence > Vision > Strong culture > Faith in themselves	<i>'Creating spaces for leadership to flourish'</i> > Connectivity and interdependence > Systemic ethics > Leadership spirit > Organisational belonging

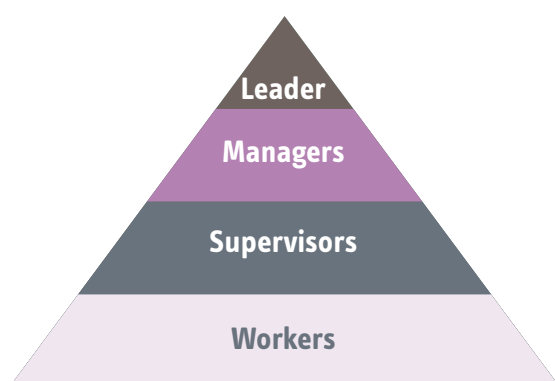
Figure 2: Qualities linked to the four leadership discourses

In the next section, we focus both on the qualities linked to the four discourses and the organisational shape associated with each. These are unlikely to be found in a pure form in any organisation, but some departments and functions may be led in a way that leans towards one or the other of the discourses and this may be reflected in how they are structured. The Messiah discourse is least likely to be found in children's social care services but some voluntary sector organisations with visionary founders can be thought of as relevant examples, and you may be able to think of others.

Controller leadership

'Efficiency through control'

The shape of a classic controller-led organisation is the hierarchical pyramid.



Controller leaders emerged in the early 20th century when scientific management theory was applied to factory work to create mass-production techniques like the production line. This leadership approach relishes the challenge of making the workplace more efficient, through use of technology, restructuring and work redesign, to increase success by using minimal resources and quality control measures.

Controller leaders tend to be task-focused. They think more about how to get the work done and less about the overall strategy and what the organisation is ultimately trying to achieve and can therefore lose sight of this. They like to set clear performance targets and measure the results. They don't like anything that gets between a workforce and a workforce completing its tasks.

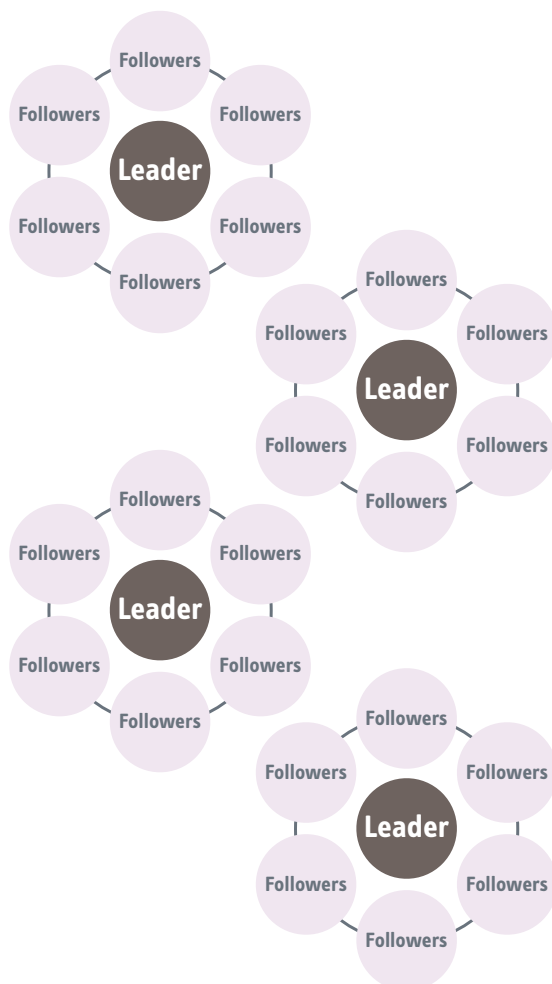
Controller leaders strive for clear accountability, systems, processes, roles, accountabilities and responsibilities. Clarity enables greater accountability and control for the leaders of organisations. Underpinning all of the above is the idea that scientific rationalism will deliver results: reason and logic will be enough and if the systems and structures are clear and measurable then the results can be predicted.

This does not allow for the more complex and messy business of working with people, with all their previous experiences, emotions and beliefs. Controller leaders like to have facts, measurements and evidence-based results, and will rely on these to deliver success.

Therapist leadership

‘Happy workers are more productive workers’

The classic shape of a therapist-led organisation or department is one made up of teams with leaders who form a leadership team.



Therapist leaders have high levels of self-awareness and understand that self-knowledge is a key leadership attribute. They can see both their own and their team members' strengths and weaknesses, and are not afraid to acknowledge and work on these to get the best from everyone.

Therapist leaders focus on individuals and on team dynamics, and try to create balanced teams with members whose skills will complement each other. The downside of this is that they may sometimes choose team members who are like them, which can lead to an unhelpful scenario of 'groupthink' instead of balance, and limit the team by excluding creative difference.

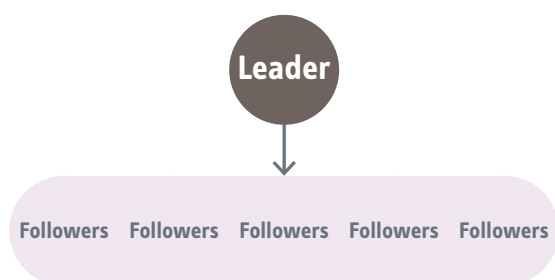
A skilled therapist leader will be adaptive and have the confidence to work with differences. They will use their skills and understanding of team and relational dynamics to operate through tensions and get the very best from a diverse but strong group.

Therapist leaders are naturally coaching leaders. They see the ability to coach and mentor their people as a vital part of their leadership role, and continually work on themselves to strengthen this ability. They support training and development and regularly seek opportunities for themselves and their teams. They believe investing in people is the key to success.

Messiah leadership

‘Charismatic leaders and strong cultures’

Messiah leadership is associated with a flat organisational structure. There will be fewer layers of leadership or leadership teams with a single figure leading a group of managers and staff.



Messiah leaders have charisma. Others admire and have trust and confidence in them. Creating a strong vision of the future and setting a clear purpose and mission enables messiah leaders to set the agenda, to inspire and motivate and to raise both morale and material resources to achieve goals.

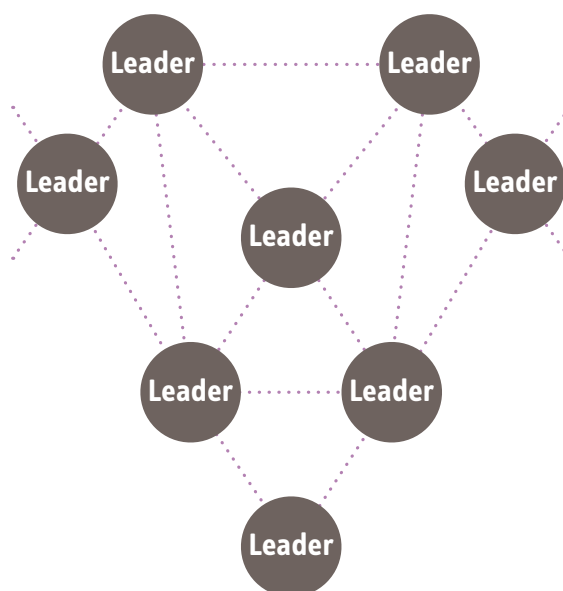
They create strong and aligned cultures, a group dynamic that binds people together in a common cause. When working well, messiah leadership creates collective energy and a sense of wellbeing. When working not so well, it creates dependency and conformist cultures.

Messiah leaders have strong egos, a strong sense of self and faith in themselves. This is expressed through their vision of the future and becomes an extension of the self. When this goes wrong it can lead to grandiosity, narcissism and major misjudgements. When working well it drives positive change and mobilises others.

Eco-leadership

‘Creating spaces for leadership to flourish’

The structure of an eco-led organisation demonstrates distributed or networked leadership where leaders at all levels are interconnected.



Eco-leadership recognises our interdependence and focuses on making, sustaining and supporting connectivity. Eco-leaders focus on networks and break down silos to distribute leadership more widely.

Eco-leadership is ethical and values-based. It pays attention to community and friendship, and creativity and imagination. It is relational and draws upon the dynamic vitality within human relationships. It aligns with strengths-based approaches to working in communities, acknowledging and participating in both the joys and challenges faced by all.

Eco-leaders encourage organisations to belong to 'places and spaces' and to develop strong community ties. Leadership is not located in one person or a group of people, but the shared property of the system in which the leader operates.

Eco-leaders:

- > shape and promote conversations that bring leadership alive
- > choose the leadership approaches that work best for the task
- > build and promote internal and external connections and collaboration
- > promote co-creation to find new and creative solutions
- > work to increase diverse participation by enabling the inclusion of difference.

Activity five

- > Do you recognise these leadership discourses in either yourself or others?
- > Which is the dominant discourse in your leadership style?
- > Which of your tasks or job roles are suited to which discourse?
- > How do each of the different discourses impact your response to diversity, discrimination and inclusion for the team / service / organisation?
- > Which discourse do you see at play most often and in which situations in your workplace?
- > Can you identify which discourse might be missing in your team, or in the teams the practice supervisors you line manage are responsible for?
- > What might need more emphasis to ensure effective working?

Other ways you can use this tool:

You could ask the practice supervisors you line manage to complete this tool and discuss with you their response to it (as a group or individually) to start a wider discussion about leadership styles.

You could share this tool with peers who are also middle leaders and use it to inform a shared discussion about leadership styles in your organisation.



We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

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Supervising the Supervisor
Practice Supervisor Development Programme
The Granary Dartington Hall
Totnes Devon TQ9 6EE

tel 01803 867692
email ask@researchinpractice.org.uk
 [#researchIP](https://twitter.com/researchIP) [#PSDP](https://twitter.com/researchIP)

www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk

Author: Helen Shaw
Organisational Consultant and Coach,
Portfolio Manager: Social Care,
Leadership and Management
Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation
Trust

Abigail Concannon
Organisational Consultant, Facilitator,
Psychotherapist and Coach

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Registered Office:
The Elmhirst Centre, Dartington Hall,
Totnes TQ9 6EL