Section 3  Appreciative Inquiry Research

3.1 The research approach

In this part of the project Zoë Van Zwanenberg, the Project Leader from the Centre, interviewed a wide range of people using an Appreciative Inquiry approach to explore individuals' understanding of leadership, their experience of leadership 'at its best' - both as a follower and as a leader - and to ask them to describe their journey to leadership. Finally she asked interviewees to reflect on leadership development, equalities and the development of young leaders.

For this stage of research we were not applying any theory of leadership or testing a fixed hypothesis. Instead we were using a grounded theory approach to derive themes and propositions from the material gathered.

The Project Leader conducted interviews by phone or in person over the course of several months with 75 people. They were from a wide range of backgrounds - age, ethnicity, sexuality, faith and disability. The gender balance was almost even over the whole group.

The research questions we used are given in Appendix 4.

3.2 The interviewees

We recruited interviewees through three major routes: the Steering Group; the Royal Society of Arts (Edinburgh); and through the Project Leader's personal contacts.

Interviewees were very open in sharing their experience and gave considerable time and thought to the responses they offered which made the whole process rich and engaging.

3.3 Notions of leadership

‘You know when you have seen and been with a good leader – you feel secure.’

In asking interviewees to talk about what good leadership looks and feels like, we were essentially asking what excites and attracts them. For almost all (98 per cent) of those interviewed it was the impact good leaders can have on both the organisation's objectives and the individuals working with the leader or being served by the business/service.
Interviewees' notions of leadership

'Good leadership gives opportunities to influence and shape programmes of work – gives you space and time to put forward ideas and take people with you.'

'It is all about a group of people who inspire others by enabling them to fulfil their own potential – less about dragging a group kicking and screaming. A good leader says how can WE harness and release that energy so you achieve what you want to do.'

'Leadership is about making change happen in society, improving and developing services and working through people to do that…. As a leader your role is to help them achieve more that they would have if you were not involved. The attractive element is that you are breaking moulds, motivating and energising most when able to change the order of things, help people out of a rut and seeing change happen through getting the people involved.'

'Leaders must have the human bit and not just the task bit, it can mean that the person comes through not just the role; you get a sense of the individual not just what they are trying to achieve. Their role then is to help others to feel empowered and to give autonomy to them to get on and deliver. What is attractive about this notion of leadership is being able to make a difference, to have a personal impact as a human being not just being a machine, but an individual human making a difference.'

'My view has changed over time, recent experience of leading an organisation through huge and difficult change has made me think more about some of the values leaders need to have:

- Business acumen to deal with a complex world, to understand the context and have a curiosity about business and people, this is not just about intellect.
- Courage along with integrity, making decisions means making choices that have consequences, and you have to deal with the consequences at a human level.
- Quality of humility, recognising human frailty which we all have however smart and clever and experienced you are – you need to be humble and willing to learn from people from different cultures, languages and backgrounds.'

'There are two or three critical components:

- Creating a compelling vision
- Create the culture and processes and structure for the vision to be implemented
- Enabling and empowering staff to make full contribution and make it real for them.

What is attractive about this is it is empowering and inclusive, acknowledging importance of bringing people with you - inspiring people and enabling them to raise their game … it’s about wider things that gaining the thing itself.'
Interviewees generally believed that leaders made their impact through their strong vision, sense of direction and ambition as well their ability to communicate their vision and energise those involved. Good leaders were also those who managed to make sense of the context for their followers. For some interviewees the vision needed to be about something bigger than the immediate organisation - it needed to be about achieving social change that would be qualitatively better and more inclusive.

Interviewees reported that good leadership was also about respect for all those working for the leader thus ensuring that they felt empowered, supported and nurtured, and helped to achieve. They also wanted to feel included, able to voice ideas and challenge which way was best. Critically they wanted the leader to demonstrate that they valued the contributions of everyone involved in the endeavour, irrespective of background, qualifications, gender, ethnicity, disability etc.

The personal characteristics of these ideal leaders were that they had high levels of self-knowledge, a genuine interest in people, strong values, integrity, courage and excellent communication skills.

For some the notion was best encapsulated by the image of ‘the Servant Leader’ but for others it was more directive. Either way the focus was always on building relationships, enabling people to grow and ensuring that the sum of the organisation or service was greater than its parts.

3.4 Leadership 'at its best'

‘People only communicate well at a very human level, one person to another. Great leaders are able to have the effect of speaking to individuals in ways that are direct and personal, whatever the context.’

We asked interviewees to describe times, people and places where they had experienced leadership ‘at its best’. For a significant number of the interviewees this was a major challenge. Indeed 25 per cent of those interviewed said that they could not think of an example: they had seen bits of their notion of leadership in different people at different times, but the whole had not come together in one person. For some the only examples they could think of were remote figures such as Nelson Mandela, Mother Theresa, Arsène Wenger, Bill Clinton, and Kevin Spacey.

Several people said it was easier to think of examples of bad leadership, making the point that they had learnt as much from bad leaders as good. This was particularly true if they had felt dismissed or their ideas and abilities treated as if they were of no value and when they were blamed when things went wrong.

Some of the interviewees reflected on the conundrum of ends and means –should we be judging a leader for what they achieve at the end, or the impact of the process over time? In other words does the end justify the means and if so what implication does this have for individuals and the whole social environment?
The examples of leadership ‘at its best’ which did emerge came from a wide variety of situations and individuals. Most of them encapsulated the notion of top down leadership. But this presented challenges where the leadership style in question did not meet the ideal yet was clearly effective. The question raised by these examples, and by some of the ideal leadership examples, was that of sustainability. Several of the interviewees talked about the importance of leaders creating a legacy that endures beyond their tenure. But they also noted that in many cases this does not happen and the departure of the individual results in a directionless void or a major shift of focus with the arrival of a new leader. One interviewee spoke very movingly of the need for ‘stewardship’ - that sense of having leadership for a while but responsibility far beyond that. The responsibility in question was about ensuring that the organisation and its people were set up to succeed without you.

For all the interviewees the most important aspect of leadership was ‘people relationships’: of course, the best leaders had vision and drive but they also had a strong focus on people. This often means challenging, pushing and supporting people to achieve more. Such leaders set clear boundaries about what is acceptable and what is not, and they expect people to be able to achieve more and to be able to learn and grow.

Interviewees were aware that it was difficult for leaders to attain such high standards. They were not gods but frail, imperfect human beings like themselves. Even when leaders were not at their best they were still committed people striving to do the best they could and to take others with them.

3.5 ‘You as a leader at your best’

Asking interviewees when they were ‘at their best’ as leaders proved to be a very challenging question. Interviewees found it hard to make the judgement about when they had been at their best, and one said that the question felt like part of an appraisal and that we would get a better answer from his team.

For some the context was critical. This was not just about the area they were working in but also the organisation and the people who were in governance roles or authority. This was important as it was such people who often gave them permission to lead, either explicitly through delegated powers or job description, or implicitly through their expectations of what staff could achieve. This raised an interesting question about who gives permission and why and whether that permission is always given to the same sort of people. If so is this one of the areas where achieving a diversity of leaders is inhibited because it is only one type of person who is expected to take on leadership tasks?

The most common factor for all the interviewees was that they saw themselves as leaders when involved in major change. In other words, they stated that they were at their best with something new, or something that needed to change fundamentally. Some of them recognised that leadership for steady state is required, but this was seen as less exciting or motivating.
and would not be their choice as a leadership challenge. They did recognise that this ‘long term maintenance’ type of leadership probably requires even more significant people skills than leadership for change, as keeping staff engaged, motivated and achieving can be even more difficult than leading people through change.

When people described themselves as leaders, 'at their best' it usually involved creating new teams, building teams and achieving new things. It was when interviewees were facing these challenges that they felt energised, motivated and keen to step up and take the responsibility of leading others. This motivation was a key part of the judgement about whether or not they felt they had taken a leadership role. Where motivation was low, they talked more about management.

For some of the interviewees part of their motivation was recognition, but for all it was about ‘making a difference’ and that difference was not only about outcomes and achievements of the teams they were leading, but also about the growth of individuals and the collective sense of owning the challenge and the results.

3.6 Journeys to leadership

‘For me it was getting opportunities, having enough space to do things that are different, I was lucky with bosses and peers who have given me that amount of space, to take risks and get it wrong, that is essential for learning. Doing it right in someone else’s definitions is just managing a task.’

This question was the nub of the research. Indeed it was through the telling of stories that we were trying to establish what had been the most important factors in enabling people both to take on leadership and to see themselves as leaders who could and did achieve something worthwhile.

One of the most notable features of people’s journeys to leadership was the importance of early experience and by that interviewees meant experience within the home, at school and in youth groups and then in their first jobs. The opportunities that were offered at this stage of their development were critical. This could be taking responsibility for siblings or being given the chance to lead a project with a youth group. The trust and belief in their innate ability to learn and achieve was fundamental to the development of confidence and openness to try new things. The quality of support and challenge given at this early stage had more impact than any of the more formal learning later in their careers.

The most significant aspect of this early development seemed to involve encountering challenges that they had initially thought too big for them. These challenges were often overcome – sometimes with the support of a challenger. These challenging experiences could also afford the opportunity to reflect, often on what was not working well and could also provide the opportunity to try again.
For those who came from under-privileged backgrounds, (for example, a different ethnic group, a poor background or what might be termed a ‘working class' background) the opportunity to take responsibility for some project or to be given recognition and support to achieve success enabled them to overcome feelings of ‘this is not for the likes of me’. Such interviewees also came to see that academic qualifications, language, culture and appearance need not be barriers to progression and the achievement of greater seniority. (Though it must also be said that some felt that organisations still used qualifications in a negative and limiting way.)

Recruitment remains a huge challenge for those from minority groups. The increasing use of on-line materials can present particular problems for individuals with disabilities such as dyslexia, and group exercises present challenges for individuals from different cultural backgrounds. One of the participants in the Action Enquiry groups reflected that her/his own organisation was not inclusive enough at the initial recruitment stage and this inevitably limited the pool from which leaders were drawn.

According to our interviewees the next important part of the journey was developing self-knowledge and the habit of reflective learning. This could come through a number of different routes. For many it was having an informal mentor or coach who helped them reflect on themselves and their relationships. It was often someone who pushed them to see the world from another perspective. For others it was the use of processes such as 360 degree appraisal, or personal development programmes that use tools such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which enabled them to see how they were different from others in their group.

For those who are gay, lesbian or transgender, the self-reflection and self-knowledge they developed as a result of their decision to 'come out' has made them feel more confident of themselves as they have moved into leadership. Their challenge has been whether organisations are open to recognising the strength which this self-knowledge brings. The biggest challenge for all was how much of this self-knowledge they could share, whether that was about a strong faith or personal experience and learning of being seen as a minority and being discriminated against. The cultural context of the organisation may be hostile to sharing this knowledge, in which case individuals require to make decisions about how to use that self-knowledge to inform their approach as leaders in relation to working with others. They also need to make decisions about how long they can stay with an organisation that is seen as inhibiting their ability to achieve as individuals and whole people.

The range of programmes people had been involved in were very wide ranging in terms of formal development. However there were three common elements:
I. The establishment of strong peer learning processes, either through action learning or peer review and challenge

II. The support of mentors and exposure to learning through engagement and observation of different organisations either through something like Common Purpose of the Social Enterprise Academy, or short term work placements, secondments etc.

III. Continued experiential base for learning as important as academic learning thus allowing the latter to be given a context, allowing individuals to apply learning directly.

Interviewees valued academic programmes highly, but the timing of them was critical: theory based learning that came before experience and self-knowledge was portrayed as of less value than equivalent learning undertaken at a later stage in the individual’s career.

3.7 What is required to develop leaders from across the whole community

'We are too hung up on qualifications and increasing professionalisation. This makes positions exclusive and creates barriers to entry.'

The key messages from all of those interviewed were very consistent: people's experience with school and the opportunities they were offered through sport, arts, youth groups etc are enormously important to the development of future leaders. Schemes such as Duke of Edinburgh Awards and Young Enterprise should be built on and valued by employers as a valid part of recruitment and selection. This early experience of both leading and working as part of a team helps individuals to build personal skills and confidence and to experience leadership, providing the basis for further learning. For many interviewees these types of involvement were a better predictor of future success than academic achievement.

One interviewee's views of three things we could do better:
In the education system, get rid of the idea you have to be “bright” and exam good to succeed. The current system supports the top 20 per cent academic achievers so that people who feel passionate about a subject come out feeling they are not valued – we need to remove this negative baggage. Recognise there is not much difference between people, and everyone has huge potential
Put more investment towards leadership and learning about self: self leadership, resilience, followership. We need to invest in this at all levels but particularly in schools.

In the work-place it is people’s first jobs that have the most impact. In these jobs people need to be given the opportunity to take on projects and challenges; to be supported through informal mentoring, peer networks and managerial engagement. This has major implications for how first line managers and supervisors are trained and developed, and for the kinds of objectives they are set. The interviewees made it clear that a core part of the first line management or supervisors job should be developing the leadership
potential of their staff, working with a wide diversity of individuals to open opportunities for learning and growing outwith formal training programmes. At its best it is providing the opportunities for learning by doing and then time and support to reflect.

Once individuals have had some experience of being in a leadership role, then more formal training and support has something concrete to build on. This could mean supporting network groups, providing some space for mentoring and providing some basic management or leadership training. Interviewees highlighted a number of different training and development programmes that had been positive for them from the Social Enterprise Academy and Common Purpose to an MBA, a graduate training programme and a range of diplomas and certificates as well as organisational programmes such as those run by the civil service.

All the programmes interviewees rated as 'good' had common factors which were then tailored to the needs of the individual in their context:

- Support for understanding self, and developing the ability to see the world from someone else’s perspective.
- Action learning tied to real work issues.
- Peer networks for challenge, reflection and support.
- Mentoring, either formal or informal.
- Time and space for personal reflection.
- Assertiveness training, depending on the context and the needs of the individual.
- Opportunities to see, hear and challenge established leaders either from within the organisation or from other places.
- Opportunities to see leadership in a different context and to develop understanding of different dynamics and needs.
- Challenging texts that will push thinking and support personal reflection.

One participant’s experience of being empowered by good leadership

‘For the first time I have been allowed to lead my own work. In this organisation I am allowed to lead and be innovative, bringing together ethnic minorities and deafness – the organisation has been very supportive giving both sign language and some management training. I have also had a mentor which has been very helpful. As a BME woman they ask me what I need, they give responsibility and it feels positive and developmental. They have helped me work a lot better. They have been very flexible and allow me to work 2 days at home as I have a young baby.
I have always worked in the voluntary sector and this is the first time I have experienced this trust and belief in me as an individual. The impact on me has been really really helpful, it has built me up and brought out strengths I was not sure I had. In a previous job I was bullied and ended up off sick and depressed but here there are a lot more opportunities and trust. From my bad experiences I have seen how important it is for leaders to be objective, less old pals and favours, to be role models of honesty.’
3.8 Widening the pool of leaders

*I am utterly convinced that unless and until we attend to basic communications skills within a learning community that is based on respect, all the great resources available to enable growth and development will be built on sand: Information sharing, reflective listening; problem solving; assertion; conflict management and resolution – these are the basics and all depend on respect for the individual and the community.*

In the final parts of the interviews, interviewees were asked to reflect on what organisations and individuals need to do to widen the access to leadership roles to the whole community. They were specifically asked what three things they would change to make a difference.

Individuals reflected on how organisations were perceived in different parts of the community and how the very words 'leader' and 'leadership' have become overladen with meaning to the point that they are ceasing to mean anything at all.

For some the word 'leader' carried very strong white male overtones that were inhibiting. For others it was strongly associated with hierarchical position and power – something they had made a personal choice to disengage from. Paradoxically, interviewees also thought that the massive growth in leadership literature and learning programmes had devalued the term so that it had no impact and could mean almost anything.

For all the key to greater engagement in roles that make a difference for organisations and communities was respect for individuals and for difference. What is needed is the active development of attitudes and behaviours that encourage and support these virtues.

Interviewees reflected that learning and development on issues of equality and diversity is largely separate from learning and development about leadership. This separation results in there being little challenge to the accepted role models of leaders or the established routes to leadership.

3.9 Reflections on Appreciative Inquiry

This research opened a rich source of stories and reflections and highlighted some critical challenges for the future development of leaders from across the whole of the community.

Interviewees thought that active encouragement for individuals from diverse backgrounds to take on leadership roles in school, through youth work and community engagement, was essential. They also repeatedly stressed that this needed to be more widely recognised and supported.
Recruitment remains a challenge for organisations, particularly in how cultural and individual difference and youthful leadership experience is valued and assessed.

Attention needs to be given to the opportunities offered to all during their first years in work, followed by the opportunity for this to be supported by more formal training and development.

The culture of organisations and their openness to welcoming experience and knowledge that encapsulates difference continues to be a challenge for all but most particularly for those involved in recruitment, development and people management.