

LEADING IN CONTEXT

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Leadership in any situation is complex and effectiveness depends on matching leadership style to the individual context.

Leadership in cultural settings is something of a paradox. The leader is first among a group of equals, encouraging colleagues and enabling their special skills. But the leader is also ultimately responsible for shaping the organisation's future. This produces a delicate balancing act, reflective of the special mix of needs in each situation.

There's a further conundrum. Leaders may be selected on the grounds that their profile and skills will enhance that of the organisation, but once in the job, they are faced with a mix of roles, not all of them related to those particular skills. Instead, the role involves cultural/artistic direction, production, facilities management, community liaison, personnel and financial management, and contribution to cultural policy.

It's even more impractical if leaders are not given sufficient power or authority to carry out the responsibilities of the position. In these circumstances, leaders are challenged to build a future for their organisation whilst concurrently developing a skill set suited to the specific context.

And context IS specific in this sector. There is no one model for an organisation, and therefore there can be no one model for leadership. On the one hand, leaders are challenged by constantly evolving cultural policies and artistic forms with no predictable future. They may also be working with an ever-changing population of colleagues. At the same time, they are required to meet the expectations of the organisation, of society, and sometimes also of government.

To make it even more challenging, organisations – and therefore contexts – evolve over time. So, too might the organisational mission, and the leader's own vision. The relationship between context and leadership is two-way, each having the capacity to influence each other (Pawar & Eastman, 103). Sometimes they mould themselves in response to the leader or others within the organisation, sometimes to

the communities in which they reside, local and global, professional, societal and economic.

Understanding the local context may define the inclinations of the institution, the choice to address specific activities appropriate to the community potentially holding the key to success.

Organisations may be situated in the cultural sector, but they cater to a broad clientele across a range of ages and needs. They employ highly skilled creative experts across a diversity of specialist disciplines, most of which are undergoing constant change. Each setting expects and responds to a broad overall vision which enables all members to develop new ideas.

Hence, the importance that leaders in this sector understand contextual leadership.

The relationship between context and leadership

Because leadership is an interaction between leader, follower, and situation (Burke, 79), it is important to consider the specific context in which each leader is placed. Leaders are variously limited by the size of the organisation (Thomas, 397), the hierarchical system (Osborn, Hunt and Jauch, 832), and the environment (Prioleau; Bishop). In cultural organisations, a further range of challenges unique to each institution might impact on the leader's capacity to lead the organisation effectively: the range and diversity of activities, geographic location and coverage, market forces and community needs. Even the weight of history may have some influence on organisations which have been in existence for a long time and find it difficult to change (Lancaster, 2007).

Leaders in cultural settings therefore operate in a continuum of contexts. Some organisational contexts move across that continuum over time, and these adjustments mean that leaders may need to modify their leadership style to suit the evolving situation. In their attempts to "hit a moving target" (Ehrle and Bennett, 197), leaders balance context with organisational expectations, personal vision, and their capacity to make a difference within the organisation, and within the sector.

The contextual style of leadership

Because they are groups of professionals, cultural organisations depend on negotiation, persuasion, facilitation and willing agreement

among members. Leaders in these settings need to be facilitators, to manage their organisations (often including their finances) in such a way as to allow the expertise of specialist colleagues to shine, and at the same time imagine potential futures.

Let's take a look at the nature of those specialists. The range of skills and personality types will vary, but it is almost certain that amongst your particular mix of specialists there will be people employed specifically for their creativity. Creativity, especially in cultural settings, is about taking risks and making a contribution. Sometimes that contribution is transitory.

Consider performance (or visual arts exhibitions, or film, or cultural events of most kinds): Performers/artists require confidence to make their creative statement. At the same time they are extremely vulnerable.

Controlling that vulnerability is challenging for a single artist, but when a number of highly-strung vulnerable individuals come together to create something, it takes a special glue to achieve an artistic result.

Performance can take place without an artistic outcome. The event goes ahead, but the magic doesn't always happen. Who creates the magic? The artistic leader. The role of artistic leadership is complex, drawing together a cohesive whole while encouraging individual and idiosyncratic activity (Dunham and Freeman 2000) - empowering the collective.

A lot of literature suggests that shared vision is the appropriate means to achieve this. In an improvised ensemble, leadership IS shared. Each individual contributes their own ideas for a limited time. Overall vision isn't preconceived. It emerges from a shared trust each one has in the other to bring whatever is necessary to the outcome, within a clear structural framework.

But in the performing arts, a shared vision is not always expected. In traditional arts companies, a group of talented individuals, each one a unique component in the performance, place their trust in one person's overall vision: conductor, director (theatre, festival, film) choreographer.

e.g. Terracini, Turangalila Symphony

Another good example comes from Ben Zander, a conductor who describes playing in a string quartet with a famous violinist as second violin. He came away

convinced that the leader of the quartet is the second violin. Not because [he] dominated the rest of us, but because in his part he had all the inner rhythms and harmonies, and he gave them such clarity and authority that we were all tremendously influenced by his playing. He was leading us from the "seconds".
(41)

The orchestral conductor or theatre director is a good example. The conductor himself does not make a sound. His power derives from enabling others to be powerful. This covert model of leadership fits the need to unite the special skills of individuals in a mutually beneficial way to realise the conductor's (or director's) unique vision for a performance (Catron). A cultural organisation is a conglomeration of individual specialists of differing backgrounds who bring their unique talents together to realise a generic goal, making this a relevant principle. Like a symphony orchestra or theatre company, it requires both highly trained professionals and broad-based visionary leadership (Lancaster, 2006: 208).

The LSO will forgive Abbado anything if a concert goes well. He will need that forgiveness. He has been the principal conductor of the LSO since 1979; rehearsals have been the one area of incompatibility between them. (Blandford)

It is difficult to enlist trust without credibility. Once established, even great artists want to experience that special magic.

Tired and worn down as they are [...] these musicians long for the purge of splendid music-making. They long to be moved, to lose themselves in the emotion of the moment. It is what sustains them through the constant scramble for work and money. ... For this moment of forgetfulness, they will love [conductor] Stepanov - for the time being, at any rate.
(Blandford)

It's a unique combination of risk and trust (going both ways), reliant on the ability of the leader to keep creativity alive at all levels. The elements of vision, credibility and trust are extremely important to each artistic (or cultural) outcome.

I say 'each outcome' because each event is individual, and finite. No matter how long the preparation, once it is over it is gone, and never occurs again in the same way. What's more, the market for it is unpredictable, and fragile, and once it is defined, it is too late to manipulate it. The performers take the responsibility of these factors very personally, adding to the vulnerability they bring to the event. These characteristics bring a precarious perspective to each project of a cultural nature.

Thus, leaders in cultural organisations need to communicate clear vision, enabling individuals to participate in its development and realisation. This style is about facilitating, not directing; motivating, and enabling. Cultural organisations need collaborative efforts within a clear visionary framework, led by champions who are both involved and committed.

No leader has a monopoly on vision, and if that vision can't be shared and endorsed, and collectively owned and built on, then it's probably not a vision for an institution. (Ritterman)

Facilitating a corporate vision builds consensus, unlocks potential, gives courage and helps people to see ways of achieving their goals (Lancaster,2007).

There's some overlap here with the role of a ship's captain, especially in times of crisis. The captain needs to demonstrate clear leadership, but he/she is at the same time reliant on the individual skills of the crew. Inspiring Leadership: Staying afloat in turbulent times, (Cranwell Ward, Bacon & Mackie) shows how identical yachts in the BT Global Challenge Race of 2000/1 experienced different results under different styles of leadership.

Such findings challenge organisations to move beyond the heroic leadership style to one more conducive to creativity. Combining the 'cult of the individual' with corporate culture demands leadership which is sympathetic, strong and visionary. An overall vision is important in creating unity. "Armed with a powerful vision, the director can create ... a sense of optimism." (Catron, 1989, p.5)

Imparting the vision presents another challenge. Retaining a connection between vision and the administrative functions of management may be a source of tension for which leaders are unprepared. Many organisations employ a high proportion of part-time workers, for whom loyalty to the vision will be peripheral, and this presents a real challenge to leaders. It's not an impossible one. A

study of leadership in research centres revealed a high level of loyalty to the Director among colleagues who had minimal financial reward, and no job security. This leader encouraged and recognised the skills of her colleagues, supporting and challenging them. Although the results of their research projects were individual, the success of the centre was shared. The Director was concerned that "all we can offer here are the benefits of doing a job that you really enjoy, with a lot of autonomy" (Zajkowski, Dakin et al.). Her colleagues acknowledged that the group had developed special skills "from always living on the edge, so we have extra resilience."

Describing an example of good leadership in an artistic setting, one said

somebody who thinks in a very constructive way ..., who thinks ahead, who thinks about the place of the institution within the community, who has a very natural rapport, who is ... a coach.(Bakke)

The leader to whom this person was referring described leadership in this way:

"Effective leadership means ... someone who knows what the members are capable of doing, .. someone who cares about the members reaching their full potential. (Smilde)

This institution reflects the leader's style. Members speak of her as supportive, trusting, thinking "with me, not against me", aware of community needs, and visionary. Using a combination of consultative and charismatic styles, this leader has reinvented the institution, leading it through two periods of structural change, changing leadership style as appropriate in the different stages of the organisation's development.

This leader demonstrates an integrative style of leadership which is also related to context, balancing different leadership styles in response to changing needs. Creative people call for this mix of style which allows the leader to orchestrate expertise, people and relationships in such a way as to bring new ideas into being (Mumford et al).

There are three elements to an integrative style of leadership:

1. facilitating the generation of ideas,
2. giving indirect support to maximise the autonomy of those carrying out the ideas, and

3. promoting the ideas across the organisation as a whole (Mumford et al, 23).

Each element requires the leader to be a facilitator, ensuring that colleagues contribute to and drive the process of realising the overall vision. Implicit in achieving this outcome is the leader's ability to recognise and assess creativity, and motivate and coordinate the input of others. The leader needs to recognise the importance of participation, and help the group to formulate a corporate vision, and then place that into his or her own visionary perspective.

if you are going to motivate people then you have got to have a sense of not only going on a journey, [but] the journey can't just be aimless wandering [...]. There's got to be a sense of purpose and intent to what you are doing and I think that is quite clear. I have nailed my colours to the mast very clearly. (Bodman Rae)

Leaders decide the extent of collective conviction through their own perception of the organisation's potential, and by their interactions with various stakeholders, within and outside the institution. "If [leaders] think they operate in a vacuum, they're wrong!" (I:45).

My experience in cross-cultural settings has demonstrated over and over that shifting leadership style to the individual context is the key to effective leadership. Essentially, leading in context is based on the transformational leadership model, but varying degrees of transactional leadership might be added to fit the specific situation.

For example, charismatic leadership is often aligned with arts organisations, especially in times of crisis. Charismatic leadership seems to have a positive effect in times of uncertainty, and this is consistent with evidence that crises provide opportunities for leaders to take strong actions which may not have otherwise been acceptable. Charismatic leadership is also often found in the early entrepreneurial stages of an organisation. Both have been true in my own experiences establishing institutions and also during times when organisations have been struggling for survival. I've also found it helpful to incorporate some elements of charismatic leadership at certain times in a cross-cultural context.

For example, when working in Asian contexts, the most significant differences are consequences of the style of formal education. If it is based on rote rather than investigative learning, the professional environment may be coloured by a different set of expectations – of

less delegation, of avoidance of responsibility, and anticipation of being instructed rather than enabled.

I should make mention here also of ethics in leadership. For example, (and once again from my own experience) a Buddhist culture will have an entirely different ethical perspective to a Christian culture, and this can have considerable influence on how one approaches leadership. The four ethical questions posed by Cavanagh et al (1981), and repeated in Robbins (1998) do not all carry the same significance in a non-Western culture.

My message is consistent with that of the Western cultural sector - enter each context with an open mind. No matter how much prior experience one has, the attitude that 'this is the only way (something) might be done' is unlikely to be helpful.

In a different culture, you may be celebrated as the incoming 'saviour', but be aware that this may well be window-dressing (or hospitality, or perhaps merely respect given a stranger - the sort of things on which the West places less importance!). The celebration of your arrival does not automatically mean that what you want to do will be accepted with equal celebration

As the contextual style of leadership suggests, leaders in cross-cultural settings need to listen to those with whom they are working. This may have to be one-on-one, for cultural - or artistic - reasons. Leaders need to determine the context which will be less vulnerable for colleagues.

For example, my experience suggests that rewards for outcomes are a greater motivator than threats for non-performance, and the notion of 'do it NOW' may be better replaced by suggesting a restructure of the order in which things are done.

In all leadership settings - particularly those involving change - I've found it useful to know each person involved, and deal with them on an individual level, respecting their differences, and working with those differences rather than confronting them. It's a long way round, but it offers a far greater reward in the long term.

Leaders - in any context - need to learn from and adapt to the culture (setting, organisation) in which they find themselves.

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