EDITORIAL

The echo of conscience: why responsible leadership should aim to change the rules [version 1; peer review: not peer reviewed]

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Abstract

Academic work on responsible leadership has emphasised two aspects: the value orientation of leaders, and the scope of interests they consider in their leadership – the range of stakeholders, current and future, human and non-human. I address these via two questions that are equally important but different in scale: one is about the motives for individual action and the other about the coordination of multiple organisations. Possible answers are considered in the context of leadership development: the developmental pathways, and the structure of leader and leadership development programmes, that are most likely to promote responsible leadership.

On the question of moral motivation (drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur) I suggest four influential factors: witnessing the suffering of others, admonitions of 'masters of justice', welfare of loved ones, and networks within which to discuss these matters. These I summarise as 'the echo of conscience'.

On the question of coordinated change at a systemic level, I review several approaches commonly found in leadership development programmes, interpret these as emerging from four 'logics' and consider the implications for responsible leader development. The four logics are: systems are so complex that entrepreneurial innovation is a primary mode of responsible leadership; specific issues might be resolved by bringing 'the system in the room'; sector-specific organising to change the rules of the game towards greater social responsibility; identifying 'positive tipping points' and seeking triggers for change.

I conclude with a meditation on idealism in responsible leadership.

Keywords

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Introduction

Academic work on responsible leadership has emphasised two aspects: the value orientation of leaders, and the scope of interests they consider in their leadership – the range of stakeholders, current and future, human and non-human. In this article I address these two aspects via two questions that are equally important but different in scale: one is about the motives for individual action and the other about the coordination of multiple organisations.

I will connect these two questions via some observations about 'responsible leadership development' – in which I include leader development as well as the development of a wider organisational capacity for leadership.

The moral motivation to act

My first question is this: why do some leaders, and not others, take action on issues of social justice, sustainability, and so forth? Let's assume that most leaders know about the challenges facing the world – to some extent – but may not be propelled into action by this knowledge. This may be a matter of 'value orientation': they know but don't care, or don't care enough, to make 'justice' or 'regeneration' a priority. But it could also be that they both know about the ecological and social crises engulfing our world, and they feel strongly that these are very, very important, and that action is needed. Despite this, they don't do much themselves and more significantly, they don't use the power and influence of their organisational roles to change policy and practices in their businesses.

This is quite understandable: we know when it comes to individual ethical action, we all tend to recognise our own intention to act ethically, regardless of our actual actions; while when it comes to assessing other people's ethics, we count only observable behaviours. For example, I personally know that I am against modern slavery, even though I can't point to anything visible to others that I do to oppose it. An observer would find it hard to assess my values in relation to this issue, even if a private conversation might reveal some decisions swayed by these values. A value orientation towards responsible leadership is a necessary but not sufficient condition for its enactment.

So, my question is quite precise: Given a company executive who knows about the social and ecological crises, and who has a value orientation toward caring about them – what makes him or her commit to action, to assume responsibility on behalf of the corporation and engage in whatever can be done at that point in time?

Our research (Gitsham et al., 2022) examined executives whose firms actively contributed to the dialogue processes to help shape the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) before and during the Paris COP in 2015 – particularly where they were expressing views on the roles governments should play in helping achieve these goals. When each of these executives accounted for their own choices to accept this wider responsibility, we detected what we call an "echo of conscience". This is a phrase adapted from philosopher Paul Ricoeur's meditations on the causes and character of a moral life, in which the 'voice of conscience' plays a significant part (Ricoeur, 1992). We found four common elements that stirred up this echo of conscience: witnessing the suffering of others (such as when an executive with a soft drinks company saw the effects of water-extraction on the lives of subsistence farmers); care for the welfare of loved ones (such as when a child questions the impact of their parents' work on future generations); admonitions of a respected authority or elder - Ricoeur refers to these as 'masters of justice' (David Attenborough was mentioned more than once); and belonging to a network in which it is normal and proper to discuss these matters.

If these findings hold true more widely, we have here some important specifications for those of us involved in the development of responsible leadership: witnessing the suffering of others, considering the interests of loved ones, hearing from 'masters of justice', and becoming part of a network where the echoes of conscience are openly and regularly discussed.

I will return to this later. But first let me address my second question, concerning the coordination of multiple organisations.

Coordinated action amongst many organisations

Like many, I have been involved in leadership development programmes seeking to bring about change – at individual, team, and organisational levels; and sometimes also to 'change the system'. Aspirations to systems change seems to be a slippery thing. What is really meant by this in practice?

Sometimes people refer to 'complex adaptive systems' to describe the circumstances they face: the multiple intermingled challenges, indeterminate causes, and autopoietic self-organising as systems adapt to changes while maintaining salient aspects of continuity. In such complexity there is no way of knowing all the effects of an intervention, and therefore the possibility that a very small change might bring about significant shifts in the way a system behaves. Therefore, leadership development might be justified in concentrating on the small things that leaders can do to shift the actions of their own organisations, to change internal company policy – for example on diversity and inclusion, fair wages, equal pay, carbon intensity, waste, and pollution, and so forth. There's no knowing how these things might become amplified in the wider world.

This reliance on the unforeseeable ripples of local actions is, it seems to me, a convenient half-measure. It justifies the kind of leadership development that implicitly promises reform without too much disturbance, and which can therefore readily be sold to companies that are doing well enough out of the current system to pay the premium prices we typically charge. It targets changed attitudes, managerial practices, leadership styles and perhaps organisational polices. But it does not address the intrinsically systemic aspects of multi-organisational interactions – precisely the features that sustain exploitative, unjust, and environmentally destructive practices.

Leadership development programmes that are open to several organisations might stand a better chance of this, and I am personally involved in and enthusiastic about some of these, including The Forward Institute in the UK, which brings together executives from across the British social economy – what Henry Mintzberg refers to as Public, Private and Plural sectors – to learn from and with each other. The Forward Institute encourages Fellows to meet as intra-organisational groups to promote more responsible leadership within their firms; and also cross-organisational initiatives to tackle 'collective challenges'. They have achieved some remarkable things, around 30 of which are highlighted on the Forward Institute website, and there are others that are rightly kept out of the public eye. These are fruits of the kind of network referred to previously, and which we have purposely designed into the business model and operating modes of the Forward Institute. But it is important to get a sense of scale here: like many (but not all) leadership development programmes, the Forward Institute draws together elite members of the establishment to accomplish two important ingredients of responsible leadership: to enhance the moral responsibility of people with power; and thereby to vitalise an enlightened (national) elite.

As we know from the wider literature, responsible leadership is often taken to mean 'responsiveness to diverse stakeholders affected by an organisation or an industry'. The elitist model of the Forward Institute has no formal means to engage its wider stakeholders, although staff and Fellows are encouraged to connect with 'front line' colleagues and local citizens. This, I think, is typical where responsible leadership development is focused on the person of the leader. By addressing the moral education of leaders, we hope for a more enlightened elite, one that will be more inclined to hear and respond to the echoes of conscience.

But there are other approaches aiming more directly at a systemic impact from responsible leadership development. For example, some are focused on specific sectors, where bringing together people from across the supply, financing, governance, and ownership system might enable collective action on the way the sector as a whole behaves. An example is the African Food Fellowship, an initiative of Wageningen University and Wasafiri (a Kenya-based consulting firm) with support from the IKEA Foundation. Cohorts of 'agripreneurs' in each of several countries complete a leadership development course with the explicit aim of collectively changing the food system. The initiative is connected to an earlier continent-wide initiative called 'Generation Africa', and the current round of Food Summit meetings, for which Wasafiri has formed and coordinated a network of food-based SMEs. In the words of Wasafiri's Chair, Ian Randall:

"Generate value for all stakeholders

I also believe Generation Africa has thrived because, from the first moment, we asked how it would generate value for all its stakeholders. Initiatives often try to compel the engagement of funders and "beneficiaries" through worthy goals and lofty ambition. But only when an initiative provides benefit to its constituents will they continue to engage, feeding the initiative's growth through their time and money. The GoGettaz community is alive and well because the entrepreneurs find it useful to their business goals. Private sector partners are strengthening their brand and reputation, as well as staying tuned to emerging trends across Africa's food system. … Generation Africa proves that it is both possible and I would suggest, essential, for driving long term changes that ultimately shift the system."

Here we see again the hope for systems change is vested in individual leaders – in this case concentrated by sector. A similar story could be told about the South African 'Partners for Possibility' where the aim is to improve the quality of school education, and to do so through a leadership development programme that draws in expertise and resources that would not otherwise be 'in' that system. Likewise in the construction sector in the UK, where the Green Building Council convenes architects, builders, concrete suppliers, planning officers, infrastructure firms, engineers and so on. We see leaders commit to improvements in their own businesses, and perhaps some bi-lateral arrangements towards more sustainable practices.

What seems curious to me is this: for all this aspiration towards system change, why so much reliance on individual leaders to achieve this? Surely the aim is to change the rules of the game – the regulations and laws that govern what is acceptable, and to align these to the aims so clearly articulated in the Paris accord and in many international, national and industry policies. So, what would be required in mustering the leaders on these many and varied leadership development programmes to the specific task of changing the rules?

Change the rules

There are precedents: in the run-up to the 2015 Paris accord, businesses from many sectors collaborated through the UN Global Compact and several other business clubs to push for tougher, more ambitious regulations. In COP26 we saw something similar: although not so organised, many of the businesses that came and lobbied were urging governments to be bolder – to set more ambitious targets, tougher regulations, and a less perverse set of incentives. Of course, not all businesses were focused on 'the playing field' – many were seeking to win the old fossil-fuelled game in the crassest self-interest. But the point is this: the significant changes we need will involve game-changing reforms which must come from governmental, legal, and regulatory choices. And these will be shaped largely by lobbying – especially whole-sector or even multi-sector lobbying that is well organised, well resourced, and well led. We know how effective lobbying can be in watering down government commitments to environmental, social, and economic justice. So, we should also be able to turn this weapon to good use – as was done so effectively by Unilever and others in Paris.

Corporate lobbying has a bad rep, but that's no reason to exclude it from responsible leadership and management education. Rather we should be preparing, training, coaching and even

facilitating coalitions of organisations[1] towards responsible lobbying. What do we mean by responsible? Well, we can turn to the same two elements that characterise our definitions of responsible leadership: value orientation and stakeholder inclusiveness. These underpin the two criteria identified by Irina Lock and Peter Seele in their 2016 model for 'deliberative lobbying': intent and process (Lock & Seele, 2016).

Some qualities of *intent* in deliberative lobbying would be that it is non-instrumental and non-opportunistic, aiming at public policy outcomes that help address societal challenges and have consensus backing from all stakeholders. Companies would have to accept that this may include increased regulation despite its potential to negatively affect financial returns to the business.

The *process* Lock and Seele propose (and our empirical research confirms) must be one that retains public legitimacy. So deliberative lobbying is characterised by three features: inclusive discourse, transparency, and accountability. Key to this is 'communicative action' as opposed to 'strategic' or instrumental action: people know 'sincerity' as an embodied sense, so inclusivity must be for real - and likely a (sometimes uncomfortable) journey of discovery.

In another paper based on Matt Gitsham's research we subject empirical examples of corporate political activity to critique based on these criteria; we find it unusual but growing in importance and frequency. My point is this: if we really hope that our responsible leadership development programmes will contribute to systemic change, we should design them accordingly. That means more than addressing the value orientation of leaders – what I call 'remedial morals for an established elite'. At best these programmes encourage better practices in some workplaces and perhaps some adventitious joint initiatives across two or three organisations. What if we aimed instead for the changes that we want to see: carbon-positive commitments; 'circular' supply, manufacturing, and consumption; inclusive and equitable employment? These are all things that will happen only when the rules of the game, the regulatory frameworks, make them necessary. We could be curating our programmes as nascent deliberative-lobbying organisations, designed to address systemic challenges.

Let me give a brief example. I mentioned earlier the excellent leadership development programmes run by the UK Green Building Council. I have seen some of the more wizened and worldly-wise executives in the construction industry inspired to make significant improvements in the environmental sustainability of their projects. But I have also heard them say that they would go further – and have the technical ability to go much further - if the regulatory frameworks made it competitively advantageous to do so. Sadly, this is too often where the conversation ends, because who are we, mere educators and researchers,

to be inciting political activism? But in these times of urgent crisis, I think this is what *our* responsible leadership requires: facilitating necessary rule-changing activism. We should design our programmes as incubators of nascent campaigns for progressive change.

That sounded like a conclusion, and perhaps I should have ended there. But to be honest I am not quite comfortable with it as an arrival point. Let me rather suggest a slightly broader context within which this activist, outcome-oriented leadership development might be located.

A good place to start is 'who needs to be there'. This is important because the answer determines much of what might be achieved (beyond personal development that is an important and common aspect of most leader trainings). Leaving aside in-company programmes, here are four ways in which one might compose a 'class' for responsible leadership development:

1. We could recruit change agents and entrepreneurs, established leaders and upstarts in the hope that they will identify changes and find ways to initiate them. This suits a Responsible Leadership intervention into society at large, in response to complex, unplannable change, hoping that people will take their own (now more enlightened) initiative to do good work,

2. We could orient the cohort around a particular issue, so invite a representative mix of stakeholders: what we call 'bringing the system into the room'. This is good for developing shared understanding, challenging misperceptions, legitimising collective authority, and taking responsibility for reforms to processes, operations, policy and (if the politics are right) the kind of lobbying described above.

3. We could convene members of a single sector – such as construction or food – for addressing the way relations work within that sector, all along the supply chain; and for lobbying to change the rules that govern how that sector behaves.

4. We could focus our efforts towards some specific outcomes, identifying 'positive tipping points' in energy reform, food systems, transportation policy, and recruit people accordingly.

These four logics of responsible leadership development may not be exhaustive, but I think it's helpful to be aware of some of the things we chose *not* to do, when we design according to habit. Most leadership development is in the first of these types: focused on individuals as leaders, aiming to convert or reinforce their 'value orientation' towards responsible leadership. However the class is composed, I suggest we bear in mind the four determinants that (according to our findings) compose the *echo of conscience*: witnessing the suffering caused by actions or inactions of their organisations; the welfare of loved ones; the admonitions of 'masters of justice' and a network of peers with whom to discuss these matters.

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[1] There are already many such coalitions, of course – amongst them the UN Global Compact, the US Business Roundtable, the UK Corporate Leaders Group on Climate Change, the Australian Business Roundtable on Climate Change.

Concluding meditation

I will conclude with a brief reflection on a lesson that I have learned from my own professional journey. I think key has been this: that I have faced defeat, which has become an important aspect of my being in the world. In this I am with Leonard Cohen, who explained one of his close friendships by the fact that both he and his friend knew defeat[2].

What do I mean by defeat? Partly that I have met the boundaries of what I can do, the limits of my negotiating and strategizing skills, that I have been beaten back. But more importantly, that I have all too often had my idealism confronted with 'the business model'. Even now my soul shrivels when a high aspiration is met by the question: so, what's the business plan? Admittedly I have often been the one to pose that question, and I know it's important and necessary. But my point is this: idealists will always come up against such limits. Responsible leadership, as a movement, is a bold expression of idealism and is therefore bound to face frequent confrontation with 'the business model'. On that cheerful note, I will end.

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[2] Cohen's point was more philosophical: that all ambition and desire will be undone by time and mortality, "And if you can relax in that, or if you can even touch it, or if it asserts itself from time to time, then the invincible defeat is transcended."

Data availability

No data are associated with this article.

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