

# From Theory to Practice: Understanding Leadership Development as an Iterative Process

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The purpose of this paper is to explore the conceptual issues in reconciling theory and practice in leadership development. The central concern of the study is the perceived issue that there is limited confidence that the prevailing orthodoxies influencing leadership development programmes actually translate into changed behaviour. The paper explores the epistemological issues in analysing the interaction between theory and practice and then reviews the evidence for the relative impact of different approaches to leadership development. A central theme of the discussion is the nature of personal constructs and how they relate to personal learning and professional development.

*Keywords:* leadership in education, leadership development, theory and practice, personal constructs, learning strategies

## **‘An Ounce of Action is Worth a Ton of Theory’**

This quotation, variously attributed to both Friedrich Engels and Ralph Waldo Emerson captures one of the key tensions and dilemmas in any form of social engagement – how to be sure that theory or principle is translated into practice, how to ensure the abstract becomes concrete and how the ethical proposition becomes the moral act.

This paper will explore the issues in translating the intangible into the tangible by focusing on the relationship between theory and practice in designing leadership development strategies. Most education systems invest heavily in developing their school leaders; there is now substantial and significant evidence about the nature of leadership development practice – it remains a disputed point as to the relative success of different development strategies. In other words do they actually make a difference in terms of school improvement, securing success or creating a high performance education system based on equity? Some leaders, successful

by a range of criteria, appear to emerge without the benefit of programmes and courses. Other people attend every course and programme available and consistently fail to become effective leaders. Kellerman (2012, xix) captures the tension perfectly:

[...] most of those who engage in leader learning do testify, albeit subjectively, to the efficacy of their experience. Still, if Americans are so good at developing leaders, why is America in such a mess? Why are our politics so ineffectual and why is our economy so resistant to resilience? Can those of us in the leadership industry honestly say that, in the last several decades, we have had the impact we wanted and intended?

For most education systems the key focus of policy for a generation has been the various permutations of school improvement of which leadership development has been a central, if not dominant, feature. While accepting the enormously complex variables influencing the success of any improvement strategy there does seem to a mismatch between the investment in leadership development and the commensurate level of improvement. There are numerous practical examples of the tension between theory and practice at work – for example the relationship between the intentions of the architect and the work of the structural engineer, the composer and the performer the teacher and the student. There is a seductive appeal about working with theories – the conversation is essentially speculative and without the need to demonstrate, justify and, most significantly, prove that the theory actually works in practice. Theoretical language can be essentially normative – the expression of power or status or, it is directly linked to practice, in other words the essential precursor to application.

For those involved in leadership development the problem is often presented in terms of impact – just how much impact in terms of leadership effectiveness does a particular strategy make? Is it possible that investment in leadership development is subject to a number of mistaken assumptions?

We think that leadership can be taught – which given the paucity of objective evidence, might be true or might not. We think that leadership can be learned quickly and easily and that one form of leadership can be taught, simultaneously, to different people in different situations – a stretch at best. We think of context as being of secondary or even tertiary importance – which is wrongheaded. We think leader – cent-

rically – that being a leader is better and more important than being a follower. Wrong again. [Kellerman 2012, xx]

Another way of understanding this is to think in terms of the conversion ratio between intended and actual outcomes. There is often what might be described as an implementation gap between what was intended and what was achieved. This is both a very practical problem in terms of designing processes and activities that might make an impact and is also a philosophical problem in terms in terms of the epistemological relationship between the abstract and the concrete and the nature of the interaction between them.

Aristotle was the first philosopher to identify and explore this topic. He argued that praxis (the ability to act appropriately) is not just about the ability to act but is about the ability to apply understanding in individual situations – it is not enough to be able to act, the important thing is to act well:

The virtue of a thing is related to its proper function. [Aristotle 2004, 146]

Aristotle distinguishes between eupraxia (good praxis) and dyspraxia (bad praxis). Praxis is essentially moral – it is not only action, it is morally appropriate action which therefore can be seen as translating theory into practice.

But no process is set going by mere thought – only by purposive and practical thought, for it is this that also originates productive thought. [Aristotle 2004, 146]

Being moral, and acting morally, requires the intention to translate principle into practice – ‘purposive and practical thought.’ Marx made virtually the same point in the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ (1845, Thesis 11):

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.

Marx’s proposition might be extended to say that interpretation is a necessary precursor to action. There is a very strong attraction to engaging in theoretical debates and developing critiques of alternative models. Such recondite activity has its adherents and may have a place in educational debates but:

While criticism remains essentially a theoretical enterprise, it remains divorced from the fortunes of practice. It can no

longer be judged in terms of the practical resolution of contradictions but only in its own terms as theoretical discourse. At worst, it becomes an exercise in erudition which requires no practical transformations of social reality to demonstrate its power, it speaks to practice entirely from without. [Carr and Kemmis 2006, 208]

The obvious cliché here is the notion of ‘paralysis by analysis’ where the focus on the theoretical is so strong that it precludes engagement with actual practice. The issue is one of moving from the process of analysis and explanation to action that is logically derived, and morally consistent with that analysis. What is significant is the extent to which there is logical coherence and internal consistency between the abstract and the concrete. In another sense that any activity is ‘fit for purpose’ or, from another design based perspective that form follows function i.e. the outcome is logically derived from its originating conceptual framework.

This is reflected in a specifically educational perspective in Giroux’s (1997, 71) commentary:

Educational theory and practice stand at an impasse. Despite the important outpouring of work [...] educational theorizing remains trapped in a dualism that separates issues of human agency from structural analyses.

This insight captures the tension at the heart of this discussion – for many, theory and practice are, in fact quite distinct rather than elements on the same continuum. This dualism is made graphic and real by Freire’s [2001, 88] view that has strong echoes of Aristotle:

Here we are engaged in an effort to overcome debilitating dualisms because we are talking about the impossibility of separating the teaching of contents from ethical formation [...] Of separating practice and theory, authority and freedom, ignorance and knowledge, respect for the teacher and respect for the students and teaching and learning. None of these terms can be mechanically separated one from the other.

The challenge in educational leadership development is to find strategies that integrate and reconcile the need for a critical and analytical perspective with the ability to inform and influence practice. To extend Bennis’ dictum, if leadership is about doing

the right things then it is not enough to debate the nature of the right things – an equal responsibility is to consider means of securing the appropriate practice.

The unity of a critical theory and a critical practice is not, therefore, the unity of a theory of education on the one side and a practice of criticism on the other. It is the unity of an educational theory with an educational practice [...] The nature of educational values must be debated [...] not only as a theoretical question, but as a practical question of finding forms of life that express them. [Carr and Kemmis 2006, 208–209]

Heck and Hallinger (2005, 232) identified:

[...] the need to shift inquiry from descriptions of educational managers' work and explorations of the antecedents of their behaviour to the effects and impact of what they do in managing and leading schools.

### **Personal Constructs and Change**

Teaching and learning are in a symbiotic relationship, the function of teaching is to enable learning, there cannot be an activity called teaching that has no relationship to learning. It is also important to recognise that teaching is only one of the variables that enables learning. Equally leadership has to be defined in terms of action and behaviours, it cannot be seen in terms of positional status, experience or knowledge. Although education, like most human activities is beset by 'debilitating dualisms' the development of educational leaders seems to be a particularly significant area for concern as there is no consensus as to how to educate educational leaders and there is relatively low confidence that the strategies that are employed do actually make any difference.

Leadership development is essentially about helping people change – and that is no different to changing as a person. As Benis and Goldsmith (1997, 8) express it:

[...] the process of becoming a leader is much the same as the process of becoming an integrated human being [...] leadership is a metaphor for centeredness, congruity and balance in one's life.

Senge et al. (2004) reinforce the relationship between the personal and the professional:

[...] if you want to be a leader, you have to be a real human being. You must recognize the true meaning of life before you can become a great leader. You must understand yourself first. [p. 186]

That's why I think that cultivation, 'becoming a real human being,' really is the primary leadership issue of our time, but on a scale never required before. [p. 192]

This focus on personal change and the process of learning, growth and development is fundamental to becoming a person.

Leadership is increasingly defined in terms of abstract and complex qualities that have very practical manifestations for example the focus on trust in schools growing out of the work of Bryk et al. (2010). The growing emphasis on learning centred leadership, the interpersonal, moral and spiritual and futures orientation of leadership has led to increased complexity and elusiveness in defining the characteristics of leaders. Leadership development might be seen to have two dimensions – the process of becoming a leader and learning the behaviours and knowledge necessary to translate generic theory into personal practice.

In many ways leadership development can be seen as reconfiguring mental maps – the movement from manager to leader is very much a matter of rethinking the maps and models that are used to make sense of the world. Sergiovanni (2005, 24) talks of mindscapes rather than mental maps. For him mindscapes are:

[...] implicit mental frames through which reality [...] and our place in this reality are envisioned. Mindscapes provide us with intellectual and psychological images of the real world and boundaries and parameters of rationality that help us to make sense of this world [...] mindscapes are intellectual security blankets [...] and road maps through an uncertain world [...]

Mindscapes 'are assumed to be true' (p. 25) and are thus powerful determinants in how we behave. I would suggest that it is our mindscapes that determine our engagement with the landscape; our mental maps determine how we construct reality and so inform the nature of our personal and professional journeys. Each leadership mindscape is unique, the product of all that makes us who we are. Effective leaders understand their mindscapes, work to systematically enrich and deepen them and use them to navigate their world. Individual mindscapes are often microcosms

of what is described as a social imaginary – the dominant understanding across society, a moral hegemony. Taylor (2004, 23) defines a social imaginary as:

[...] the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.

As with any social phenomenon there will always be multiple interpretations and perceptions of the nature of an educational institution – in other words many competing imaginaries. Much of our understanding of leadership tends to be based is confined within what Taylor (2007, 539) calls the immanent frame, i. e. the dominant modern assumption that ‘all thought, feeling and purpose, all the features we normally ascribe to agents, must be’ in the mind and inside human beings. People are seen as having inner, psychological properties (which include cognitive, emotional and aesthetic capacities), as well as being social agents. For any learning or development to take place the internal mindscape has to change in order to enable action in the world to change in a way that is appropriate and consistent.

Human growth and development can in many ways be seen as a process of modifying and developing mindscapes through the key transitions in human life. So from child to adolescent to adult, from single to married from novice to master all involve reorienting personal mindscapes. In many ways the apprentice model of learning and development shows how, with support, knowledge and skills can help develop confidence and capability over time. In the context of this discussion the key challenge is what are the most effective ways of changing and developing mindscapes or how best to convert theory into practice.

Our social imaginary at any given time is complex. It incorporates a sense of the normal expectations we have of each other, the kind of common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life [...] Such understanding is both factual and normative; that is, we have a sense of how things usually go, but this is interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go. [Taylor 2004, 24]

This takes us back to the key issue in translating theory into

practice – it is not enough just to act, action has to be morally consistent and translate aspiration into actuality. This has to be seen as a learning process, one of growth and development and engaging with the interaction of beliefs and practice. For Dewey (1933, 23) the pivotal component of this learning process is reflection which is an

Active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and further conclusions to which it leads [...] it includes a conscious and voluntary effort to establish belief upon a firm basis of evidence and rationality.

If it is accepted that leadership can be learnt – rather than inherited genetically – then a central concern become the identification of those strategies that are most likely to help individuals change their personal constructs. Moon (2004, 14) summarises the perspective that Habermas (1971) brings to the debate about the relationship between theory and practice. It is not enough to rely solely on evidence – what is required is:

[...] the development of knowledge via critical or evaluative modes of thought and enquiry so as to understand the self, the human condition and self in the human context. The acquisition of such knowledge is aimed at producing a transformation in the self, or in the personal, social or world situation or any combination of these.

For both Dewey and Habermas the emphasis is on developing modes of thought, central to which are the various manifestations of reflective practice. Their work influenced the central insights of Argyris and Schön (1974). The crucial relationship in any model of professional work is the development of the relationship between theory and practice and seeing that relationship as essentially iterative – i. e. each informs the other. It is the success of this mutual influencing that determines the integration of theory and practice. The following model shows the dynamic relationship between theory and practice and how in a learning environment there is a process of mutual influencing for which the key mediating influencing process is reflection.

This is very much the action learning process and the basis of most models of coaching and models that require learners to re-configure their mental models of themselves and their practice (1974, 4):



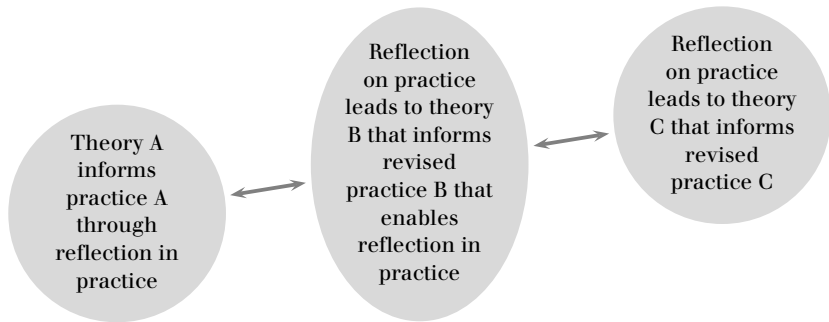


FIGURE 1 How Theory and Practice Exercise Mutual Influence

All human beings – not only professional practitioners – need to become competent in taking action and simultaneously reflecting on this action to learn from it.

On the basis of this discussion so far it becomes possible to offer a series of propositions about the nature of the relationship between theory and practice:

1. Theories, models and constructs are essentially personal mental models of the world (mind maps) that are often shared (the social imaginary).
2. These theories may be very simple, when and what to eat, or very complex, particle physics. The important issue is that there is no behaviour or body of knowledge that does not have a relevant personal construct.
3. Learning can be seen as the process of understanding personal theories and relating them to other theories and choosing on the basis of the most apt or appropriate.
4. Converting an espoused theory into desired outcomes through action requires a commitment to action that is then mediated by review and reflection
5. Theories are constantly modified and adapted to suit changing contexts or on the basis of feedback ‘critical and evaluative modes of thought’ – what works or does not work.
6. The process of review, in Schön’s model, can be understood as reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action.
7. Translating theory into practice is an iterative process in which both change and develop.

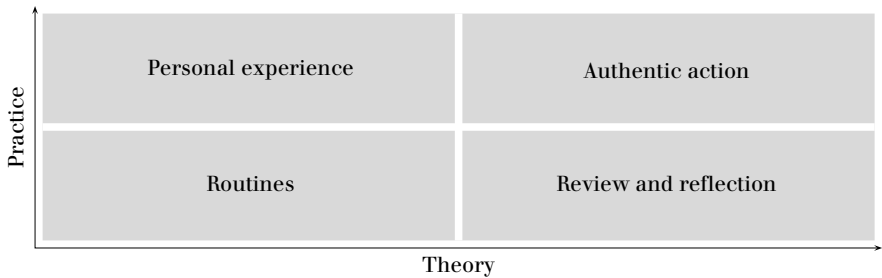


FIGURE 2 Theory, Practice and Authenticity

## Learning and Leadership Development

Although the following discussion focuses on leadership development the principles identified apply to all forms of professional learning in education.

If leadership development is about helping individuals to understand their personal constructs in terms of their mindscapes or mental maps then the key issue is what are the strategies that are most likely to help translate the theoretical model of effective leadership into actual, consistent, authentic practice.

Figure 2 shows that it is only in the balance of theory and practice that effective, appropriate and authentic action is possible. A high emphasis on practice leads to personal experience that might be valid but is often idiosyncratic and inconsistent and, crucially, may not reflect the most effective practice. Equally a high emphasis on theory leads to high levels of review and reflection but has no engagement with action. A low emphasis on theory and practice results in routinized working – what might be described as managerialism.

Effective professional development integrates theoretical principles and practical applications. Professional development by bullet point does not work because it leaves teachers without the knowledge of underlying principles that enables them to create the conditions in their own classrooms that are the key to improved student learning. However, theoretical content that is not linked to practical applications and rich illustration is also ineffective. [Robinson 2011, 112]

McGilchrist (2009) has explored how the two hemispheres in our brains influence how we perceive and engage with the world. In broad terms the left-brain is perceived as the logical rational dimension of our engagement with the world, the right brain

the social and emotional response to the world. This coincides with many definitions of the differences between different types of learning experience and reinforces the importance of balancing and reconciling the rational and the emotional (p. 174):

The world of the left hemisphere, dependent on denotative language and abstraction, yields clarity and power to manipulate things that are known, fixed static, isolated, decontextualised, explicit, disembodied, general in nature but ultimately lifeless.

This is very much the world of ‘doing things right.’ The right hemisphere in a very different, it (p. 174):

[...] yields a world of individual, changing, evolving, interconnected, implicit, incarnate, living beings within the context of the lived world, but in the nature of things never fully graspable, always imperfectly known – and to this world it exists in a relationship of care.

These elements capture the reality of life in organisations – they are messy, full of contradictions, emotions and ambiguities. This is the world that leaders need to inhabit not an artificially neat, rational and controllable world. For Morrison (2002, 116)

It is no longer possible to rely on linear models of management. Linear models of management, which underpinned the simple linear causality of the command and control mentality of hierarchical, bureaucratic organizations, have to be replaced with networked, nonlinear, emergent, mutually informing groups.

What would happen if the left hemisphere became dominant in the world?

In fact more and more work would come to be overtaken by the meta-process of documenting or justifying what one was doing or supposed to be doing – at the expense of the real job in the real world. [McGilchrist 2009, 429]

In many ways effective leadership development is about enabling leaders to do the ‘real job in the real world.’ If this is to be achieved then leadership development has to focus on strategies that will help individuals to firstly understand their personal constructs, secondly to identify alternative approaches when appro-

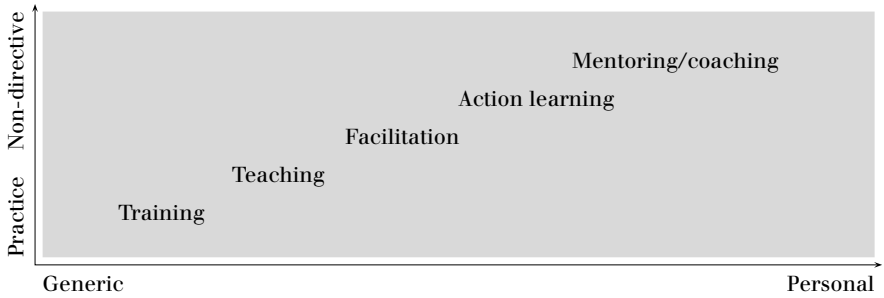


FIGURE 3 A Typology of Helping Strategies

priate and thirdly to embed these different approaches into their habituated practice.

Figure 3 offers a hypothetical model of the potential impact of different learning strategies in terms of engaging with personal constructs, enabling change and increasing the potential for improving practice and so performance. The central proposition is that people are more likely to change if the strategy is personal to them and the approach is non-directive i. e. negotiated and personalized.

Therefore generic training activities are least likely to bring about real change in the sense that they are, usually, directive and generic – i. e. focused on the ‘right answers’ that can be applied by everyone. While quality teaching and facilitation are significantly more likely to enable change it is action learning and coaching and mentoring that are most likely to make an impact in terms of reconciling theory and practice and leading to morally appropriate action.

Action learning has a wide range of meanings and applications – action research and action inquiry are common manifestations. The following definition of action inquiry provide a very clear definition of the scope of the approach (Torbert 2004, 1):

Action inquiry is a way of simultaneously conducting action and inquiry as a disciplined leadership practice that increases the wider effectiveness of our actions. Such action helps individuals; teams, organizations and still larger institutions become more capable of self-transformation and thus more creative, more aware, more just and more sustainable.

Action learning is a practice orientated problem-solving model that works through collaborative approaches. It is based on the principle of ‘learning by doing.’ It combines a focus on shared

problem solving, personal and group learning and is a powerful vehicle for improving performance, developing practice and supporting innovation. Because it works through genuine issues it is perceived to be both relevant and developmental. It requires a systematic and disciplined approach and, most distinctively, the active intervention of a coach/adviser to provide support and insure the integrity of the learning process.

The key characteristics of the action learning approach are:

- Working in real time on genuine problems or issues.
- Observing, reflecting on and understanding the implications of behaviour, actions and strategies.
- Analysis, drawing conclusions and planning the next stage of the process.
- Designing the next appropriate strategy and implementing it.
- Team based working-balanced teams of four to eight people.
- Genuine and challenging problems.
- Working through questioning and listening.
- Creating time and space for reflection on task and process.
- Supported by mentoring and coaching.
- Shared commitment to action.
- Celebration, consolidation and preparation for the next stage.

Mentoring and coaching are, perhaps, the most ‘natural’ of learning relationships. They are also, probably the most cost effective in terms of time and impact. In their various guises they appear throughout history and across cultures as the optimum means of enhancing individual learning. Most of us develop language as small children through an intensive one-to-one relationship; we learn to drive on the same basis. The greatest artists and musicians have usually had their innate ability developed in the same way. The concept of apprenticeship was central to most trades for centuries. My ability to produce this text and your ability to read it is largely a result of mentoring and/or coaching.

Mentoring and coaching have enormous potential to secure deep learning through the process of the internalisation of ideas and theories leading to understanding and so to appropriate action. There is also a clear link with individual performance and mentoring and coaching. Sports’ coaching has become a highly sophisticated set of techniques that are as much concerned with self-image and personal efficacy as with the technical skills needed for success in a given event. There is an almost theological

dispute about the relationship between mentoring and coaching with fierce ideological stances being adopted.

This discussion follows classical usage in defining mentoring, the role of Mentor in the *Odyssey* in guiding Telemachus, Aristotle mentoring Alexander the Great etc. However it is important to recognise that mentoring and coaching are part of a helping relationship and the boundary between them may be blurred and often they will reflect the changing priorities in a helping relationship. For example a new headteacher may be offered broad support through mentoring but may need coaching through specific challenges e.g. a performance management issue.

According to Goleman (2002, 62):

Coaching's surprisingly positive emotional impact stems largely from the empathy and rapport a leader establishes with employees. A good coach communicates a belief in people's potentials and an expectation that they can do their best. The tacit message is, 'I believe in you, I'm investing in you, and I expect your best efforts.' As a result, people sense that the leader cares, so they feel motivated to uphold their own high standards for performance, and they feel accountable for how well they do.

Mentoring and coaching have the potential to enhance personal relationships that in turn enables a clearer focus on performance that is demonstrated very powerfully in the increasingly significant area of sports coaching (Grout and Perrin 2006, 150):

The athlete certainly needs technical coaching and it is primarily up to the coach to establish a productive relationship. However success depends on the initial relationship developing into that of a two-person high performing team. This means reaching the stage where that are able to challenge each other. When challenges are well expressed and well timed, they allow the relationships potential to emerge as together they find new ways of doing things that neither of them might have discovered alone.

This model drawn from athletics has precise parallels in the field of education; it is all about 'finding new ways of doing things' through challenge and with shared understanding emerging. The impact of coaching/mentoring can be demonstrated by reference to the detailed analysis of Joyce and Showers (1983, 9):

- 5% of learners will transfer a new skill into their practice as a result of theory.
- 10% will transfer a new skill into their practice as a result of theory and demonstration.
- 20% will transfer a new skill into their practice as a result of theory, demonstration and practice.
- 25% will transfer a new skill into their practice as a result of theory, demonstration, practice and feedback.
- 90% will transfer a new skill into their practice as a result of theory, demonstration, practice, feedback and coaching.

Joyce and Showers show how the potential for transferring an abstract concept into actual practice is significantly enhanced by the extent to which the theory is mediated through a range of strategies that enhance the potential for personal understanding and successful application.

One of the most important insights in learning theory is Benjamin Bloom's (1984) discussion of solutions to what he calls 'the two sigma' problem. Bloom shows that students provided with individual tutors typically perform at a level about two standard deviations (two sigma) above where they would perform with standard group instruction. This means that a person who would score at the 50th percentile on a standardized test after regular group instruction would score at the 98th percentile if personalized tutoring replaced group instruction.

Joyce and Showers and Bloom all point to one central and fundamental theme – coaching and mentoring are about learning and, most importantly, they are about securing personal change to help translate theory into practice through changing behaviours. From the development of key management skills, e.g. managing a meeting to higher order leadership development e.g. creating a high performance culture the chances are that the one-to-one relationship is the best way to bring about deep and sustainable change.

In summary it seems that a number of propositions can be identified in developing a model of leadership development that integrates theory and practice and meets the criteria for ensuring appropriate, i.e. morally valid, action:

- Leadership development needs to be work based and focused on the actual job.
- Effective leadership practice needs to be analysed and under-

stood in the context of alternative theoretical and research based perspectives.

- Learning needs to be seen as an iterative, cumulative, process in which the learner is able to develop a personal construct that is relevant to their situation and stage of development.
- Personal engagement through coaching and mentoring in order to provide feedback and focused interventions.
- Collaboration with peers and different contexts is fundamental to securing feedback developing reflexivity i.e. critical awareness of self and practice.
- Opportunities to take risks and to practice key behaviours and skills.
- Recognition of successful learning and reinforcement of personal change.

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