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Chapter title: Initiating relational public sector reform through micro- and macro-initiatives in the early years system in Greater Manchester

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Key words: relational, leadership, soft power, workforce development, goals, narrative, early years

Introduction

The Greater Manchester Model of Unified Public Services, known as the GM Model, articulates a vision for reformed public services in Greater Manchester (GMCA, 2019). The Model is organised around a core value of designing services around people and communities, working with strengths as well as needs. It is based on a systemic view of public services delivered through integrated place-based teams. It is underpinned by a network of relationships; between services and communities, between public, private and voluntary sectors, between organisations working in places, and between place-based teams and specialist teams. The leadership required is integrated and shaped around place and people rather than institutions and is mirrored in a workforce that collaborates across institutional boundaries.

Commitment to reformed public services is well embedded in Greater Manchester. The GM Model can be traced through the Greater Manchester Strategy 2021-2031. The Strategy was published in the wake of the pandemic, which ‘necessitated a collaborative approach to working at a scale not seen before across sectors and agencies across Greater Manchester’ (GMCA n.d, p.7). This suggestion of a reinvigorated relational working approach in GM is substantiated in the details of ‘how we work together’ in the strategy, which focus on acknowledging the complexity of relationships in the region, the basis of trust on which they are formed, and asserting a model of distributive leadership.

In this chapter we outline how we worked as embedded collaborators through academic membership of GMCA’s School Readiness Board, as evaluators and leaders in a large Department for Education funded project on early outcomes and as consultants, delivering a strengths-based coaching programme for early years leaders across GM’s ten local authorities. As such, we were able to become embedded academic collaborators working with the system leadership rather than on it (Wilson *et al.*, 2024). Our coaching programme was delivered to leaders in the early years field, where these strategies feed through into the Early Years Delivery Model and the GM School Readiness Programme.

Our commitments to relational public sector came through our learning from clinical academic experience with families and workforces, where focusing on strengths-based approaches has accelerated outcomes that were important for families (Pilnick & James 2013), and supported change towards more person-centred design and delivery in charity and public sector organisations (James *et al.*, 2016a; James *et al.*, 2016b; James *et al.*, 2021a). Within GM we were able to support a more ‘other’ focused agenda which was enacted in meetings between parents and professionals, (i.e., where parents were given the first slot on the agenda), and in meetings between local authority leaders, where the sending of messages from individuals was relinquished in favour of listening deeply to others and creating shared understanding across the combined authority (James *et al.*, 2021b). In this chapter our aim is to describe and explore the outcomes of the leadership coaching programme from the participant’s perspectives and discuss the design of the programme, addressing

the 'how' of developing the 'relational capabilities of public service systems' (see Wilson *et al.*, 2024).

Literature and context

Relationality is a core element in theories of contemporary leadership in public services. In a review for the Leadership College for Government, which trains senior civil servants and public service leaders in the UK, King, and Wilson (2020) found a general trend in leadership studies away from a focus on individual leaders' qualities towards the relational foundations of leadership and its impact on others in terms of empowerment and building trust. The review found that common to contemporary conceptualisations of leadership, including network or collaborative leadership, was a focus on social behaviours for the joined-up governance of public services. This represents a departure from the idea that leaders can act alone; in a pluralistic governance model, the role of leaders is to manage collaboration in an inclusive way, building relationships between actors in the system and mobilising actors for change (King *et al.*, 2020). An understanding of complexity in social issues, outcome creation and the delivery of public services is central to many discussions of relational leadership and prompts a requirement for collaboration and an understanding of the importance of workplace relationships (Clark *et al.*, 2014; French *et al.*, 2023; Ford, 2020). Overall then, this perspective has a focus on relationships rather than individuals as enabling effective leadership for public services.

In a context of relational public services, there is plenty of discussion on how leadership ought to operate in practice. Leaders must work across systems, collaborating on outcomes outside their own organisations, building trust and coordinating resources (French *et al.*, 2023; Masters, 2021). As Clark *et al.* (2014, p.8) state: 'relational leadership 'addresses the need for leaders to hold at the forefront of their thinking and actions a concern with modelling and fostering relations across all aspects of the system within which they work'. To this end, leaders should foster relationships among workers and between organisations (Bartels *et al.*, 2024), engaging empathetically with others and 'creat[ing] space' for their participation in decision-making (Ford, 2020). This suggests the importance of social skills or soft skills to public service leadership (Dickinson, 2020), including sharing, listening, being responsive to and supporting others (Clark *et al.*, 2014). For Lowe *et al.* (2024, pp.2-4), this involves creating relationships that are more than transactional; instead, they are based on recognising the value of the other person.

The implications of this understanding of effective leadership have created some impetus to consider how to design leadership development opportunities that focus on the relational practices that underpin the enactment of relational leadership (Ford, 2020; Tourish, 2020). In the context of UK local government, Iles and Macauley (2007) report that historically most development efforts focused on individual leaders. Instead, they proposed an action learning approach that involves 'working on 'real' problems whilst also paying attention to learning and relational processes' (p.23). Similar themes have been taken up in more recent discussions on relational approaches to leadership development. Experiential learning in context is one aspect of this approach, where leaders are supported to try new behaviours in the workplace (Dickinson, 2020). There is an aspect of challenge, where new ideas are introduced to support systems transformation, alongside a commitment to strengths-based learning and confidence building (Hill *et al.*, 2021). Relational practices are encouraged through creating interactional opportunities and developing empathy and regard for others. In this approach to leadership development, there is often a group learning process, with the facilitation of interactional processes that enables peers to learn together and develops peer trust and support (Iles and Macauley, 2007; Hill *et al.*, 2021; Lowe *et al.*, 2024, pp.19-20). A recent case study of such a dialogic approach in Sweden that sought to develop how leaders conceptualised their

identities, roles, and relationships, suggested its potential for supporting a move towards relational leadership in the workplace (Narbutaitė Aflaki and Bassi, 2024). Overall, these accounts suggest that through attention to social awareness and social skills, relational leadership development focuses not only on individual leaders but on their collective ability to work together and so the relational dynamics of leadership practices in context (Day 2000).

A rich framework of collective leadership development comes from Eva *et al.* (2019). It describes how leadership development can be delivered to develop collectives rather than individuals. Their framework is designed as a quadrant chart, with leadership development programmes along two dimensions: context-centric/consultant-centric and normative/critical. The first dimension describes the extent to which the development is standardised or context-specific, while the second describes the extent to which the development seeks to improve existing behaviours or fundamentally change ways of working.

The case study that is the focus of this chapter was one part of a wider programme of work that sought to adapt the coaching model developed by the first author (James *et al.* 2021b) through co-design with locality leaders in the early years system in Greater Manchester. The coaching model invites participants to develop personal goals for change around aspects of relational practice, for example *really listening* or *making more time for reflection during conversations*. Video recordings of authentic conversations between the participants enable the supervisor to find moments when participants are practising their desired change (i.e., really listening and pausing to think). The moments of interactional strength, which are personalised to each participant's goal, are reviewed in a group session. All participants experience the impact of seeing themselves and their co-learners from a strengths-based perspective. Mapping the design of our programme to Eva *et al.*'s (2019) framework, the approach is balanced on the first dimension. The consultant's centrality is on the embodiment and adherence to principles and processes of strengths-based video review. The authenticity of conversations and personal goals ensures the programme is grounded in the situated context of the participants (their personal development and the development of their services). Mapping the programme along the second of Eva *et al.*'s dimensions surfaces the fundamental relational proposition of the video review method. Put simply the objective is to enhance relational competency in work. The proposition is that enabling relationships to flourish will lead to better decisions because they are informed and shaped by the 'other'. Adapting behaviour is not an aim. Changing the priority of relational working is. However, participants become more attentive to their positive ways of relating through micro analysis of video clips and behavioural change is observed because of the fundamental re-framing of work as relational. On both dimensions, our programme maps to the centre of Eva's quadrant.

In this chapter we report a case study from one of the three localities that took part in the coaching programme. The research was approved by the Health and Education Research Ethics and Governance Committee at Manchester Metropolitan University (reference number 45901).

Methodology

In the case study area reported below, four participants who were all service managers in the early years started the programme, but only one completed it due to structural change in the locality. The locality had a strategic lead who worked closely to support implementation of the leadership coaching programme in their area.

We draw on short reflective online interviews that were conducted with the coaching programme participant (Sharon), the strategic lead of the locality (Hannah) and a partner member of the study

team whose remit was to support implementation of the programme across GMCA (Jane)¹. Our findings draw on the process notes taken by the first author (consultant and supervisor of the video coaching programme). The interviews were conducted by the second author after programme delivery had finished.

The work took place over two years, from 2021 to 2023. The first phase of the leadership coaching project was consultant-led, with the first author delivering three full days of in-person training in relational-based coaching and co-design to participants over a period of ten months. This core training was delivered alongside monthly locality group supervisions with the aim of participants both learning key concepts and experiencing coaching for themselves. The beginning of Phase Two, which lasted eight months, marked a move to peer-led delivery. The participants developed their own ways of talking about the key concepts of video coaching – safe space, encounter, creating space in dialogue through silence and pausing. They developed their ability to capture and review video from a strengths-based perspective and then made local plans on where and how to implement the video coaching method in their services. They continued to experience video review through group supervision from the first author while writing locality-specific coaching guides and protocols for relational leadership and arranged governance for video coaching in their localities. The final phase, was delivered across eight months and involved place-based implementation of the coaching programme. In the case study area, the participant co-led a series of workshops with their new team which was taking on the lead responsibility for implementing early identification of speech and language delay across health and early years.

Findings

The case study

In Berksley, the leadership coaching programme was initiated with senior leaders in the Start Well service. The programme was intended to support a locality focus on the implementation of a new cross-agency method of assessing communication and language at 18 months that was being delivered against a background of a move towards integrated working in the early years across Greater Manchester. The programme took place within these shifts to new ways of working, as well as in the context of a major review of early years' services in the area. Two participants left the programme as a result of the review and one left the organisation, leaving one participant and the strategic lead in post to complete the programme. In the final phase, where the participant led coaching workshops with a group of leaders, there was a recognised need for sensitivity to this context of organisational change, as well as a desire to bring a newly-formed team of colleagues together. The involvement of the strategic lead in articulating a vision for the work, embedding it in local strategy through the Children and Young People's Plan, and supporting the trainee, was a major strength, ensuring the continuation of the commitment of the Berksley team to the leadership coaching programme.

Findings

The Starting Points

The leadership coaching programme was commissioned through the School Readiness Programme Board to support the implementation of early identification for children with speech and language delays. It was aligned to the vision for reformed public services in Greater Manchester, as articulated through the GM Model. All three research participants talked about the need for relationship

¹ These names and the name of the locality have been changed to protect the identities of those involved in the research.

development to support the place-based integrated working core to the GM Model. The GMCA consultant, who was a part of the design team for the leadership coaching, said:

the relational coaching fits very much with that place-based team leader role because it's around not just your own leadership learning, but it's how your leadership learning impacts or drives or motivates those others around you. (Jane)

Jane went on to say that while there are various leadership programmes available for local government, few focus on the relational basis of effective public services, strengthening team relationships and supporting colleagues to learn from each other and work across professional silos. The strategic lead in Berkley described the expected contribution of the coaching in terms of a service focus on partnership working and, in particular, an early years' delivery model to which multi-agency working is central. She said:

I just really value the, I suppose I think of it as the idea of coaching. I know that it can make such a difference. And I think particularly in local government and the way that we're wanting to work in a more integrated way, across different organizations, we don't offer a great wealth of training courses. You know, we often stumble around, how do we develop not just motivated leaders, but leaders that can really tune into their teams. (Hannah)

Within Berkley, the leadership coaching was also conceived of as a way to support team members working across the system in the context of organisational change. The strategic lead in the locality was keen on running the coaching to support her leadership team through a service review, cognisant of the implications of the review on the workforce. In addition, the participant on the programme described how the coaching could support a team as they implemented a new programme of work:

one of the biggest changes for my team is we're gonna be starting implementing the assessment [to assess communication and language at 18 months]. And that is a huge shift in what they've been doing. And I knew, I anticipated, that it might cause a bit of unease amongst the team and thought we could use the leadership coaching as a way of sort of bringing the team together. (Sharon)

The support for the leadership coaching programme in Berkley was achieved through alignment with a strategic driver for integrated working, a valuing of the approach to leadership development – relational, 'tuned'-in' – and the specific context of organisational transformation.

Sharon's Turning Points

Sharon was the coaching programme participant. We now consider her reflections on the leadership coaching and how it worked in Berkley. The participant's goals were like the North Star – helping set the course for the work on the ground. Sharon described her goal as 'sitting back and listening and thinking before I respond and react', describing her motivation to move away from task-based working and the historically reactive professional culture which she had encountered through video review in the initial three training days. All the locality teams that took part in the programme were asked to discuss their implementation plans for the 18-month communication and language assessment in that initial training. They were videoed and a strength from each locality team was played back to the whole group session. The two interviewees in Berkley recount the story of the video review, describing how their locality group focused on completing the task at the expense of conversation and reflection. The strategic lead, Hannah, said:

they all laughed when they looked back at the video because there was very little talk. It was just like, 'right, let's get on with it. You do that. I do this, this, this, this, this' and they were all hands-on kind of action. And actually it was only really by seeing the video that they could reflect on that [*laughing*], and they weren't actually actively engaging with each other, but they were doing the doing while they were trying to engage. And actually that wasn't a good use of their time. And I think that helped them to shift, to know that actually when you're given a task or we're given a task as a group, let's explore that. Let's listen to each other and actually let's identify what somebody else is saying. [...] And I think we need that because there are situations that arise where people are making decisions in isolation or they're making contrary decisions after things have been agreed, and I think we would benefit from some of that. So I think we have to use video camera because I think people need to see it, don't they, they actually need to see themselves, it's very strong. (Hannah)

Hannah here summarises the power of the video in enabling the reflection of the group, and how that in turn scaffolded reflections on practice. Sharon explains the powerful realisation that she had during video feedback of their group interaction:

When I first saw our video feedback, it was really, really clear that we were very task driven and very reactive. And we didn't think we were until we saw that video [...] When we had that first video feedback, everybody saw it, it didn't sit comfortably for us initially, but do you know what, that might have been the defining moment actually when I thought, I need to, my goal is different now. [...] I laughed actually because I thought, 'Oh my God, that's just, that's us, we are very reactive and task driven, and I know there's a place for that cause there's gotta be aren't there, but for me it was like, it was like an eye opener really. It was like, wow. (Sharon)

The video footage that was fed back was a strength because it did contain a moment where one of the team members paused to listen to another. The responses from the participants show that using strengths (which are situationally and contextually defined, not behaviourally defined) can create moments of dilemma. Sharon went on to explain that this realisation directly motivated the changes in her leadership practices.

Sharon talked about the benefits of putting her goal into practice:

I'm sort of sitting back now and thinking about it, because I wanted to do that for myself, really, but also for the team. Because these changes [i.e. implementation of the communication and language assessment] have absolutely been quite big for the team. And I suppose I'm a bit of a solver. I wanna solve everybody's problems, which you can't do, and I suppose for me, it was sitting back and listening, and then just asking those tiny questions and putting it back to the person that's asking me. [...] And there isn't always a solution to everything. And really they're an experienced team, my team. They should be able to solve their own problems. And I wanted to be able to let them do that as well, rather than coming to me all the time and I'm saying, well, let's do this, this and this. [...] So I'm sort of trying to practice that really in in everyday working and even within our leadership team. [...] And I think all together, I think that has really influenced my leadership style now. (Sharon)

The initial framing of her goal was linked to the objective to implement the new early identification programme. Over time, her goal was framed in a more personal way because it was rooted in the situated practices of her interactions. She then began to reconsider the meaning and distribution of leadership. Sharon began to use her goal in a multi-agency setting, describing how the micro

practices she had evolved through the coaching programme had helped her to respond rather than react, the deeper listening to other perspectives had helped her to overcome initial 'anxieties' and build trusting working relationships across the early years system.

The Power of Co-design

Co-creation was a key aspect of programme design. It was important that the programme was shaped by and responsive to local priorities and the needs of the group. This was a particularly important feature of the programme to the strategic lead:

I think what was also very exciting was this idea of the leaders, established leaders, coming together to develop this program together, that felt very exciting and I hadn't experienced or seen anything with the same kind of involvement from leaders. (Hannah)

Hannah described the initial hesitation of participants to take responsibility for leading on the direction of the programme, given expectations that it would be directed by the facilitator. While completing specific tasks including writing a locality-specific guide to video feedback, Hannah describes a process of collective learning emerging:

I think that was sort of their turnkey moment when they could see that they could influence the shape of what they were wanting to do and they were using their own experience to be able to do that rather than somebody else telling them, 'this is best practice, this is what the research says, so this is why you're doing it'. They were actually being much more reflective, using others' ideas, as we all do, but actually demonstrating that they could put the structure in. And I think there was a greater pride in that, you know, they felt, when we were able to share that document with the wider, the wider coaching group. But then also we shared it with our own leadership team. It was that acknowledgement that this was something that they were doing. (Hannah)

Sharon in turn reflected on how the micro listening practices that had been central to her goal were put into practice in the programme of sessions that she led with the first author in the final phase of the project:

I think in particular for me it was it was the listening to them, really listening to what they were saying and then changing what we were doing totally to reflect what they needed. So for example, obviously the implementation of the 18-month communication and language assessment is the big thing for us. And so we did a bit of work on change and how they felt, a lot of group work, a lot of feedback, but then some of the feedback that came back then changed our thinking of what we would do the next week. Because it reflected what they were saying, rather than just have that as a question and answer, it was about making that meaningful the week, the week after, if you will, at the next session. (Sharon)

The design of the programme, with its commitment to locality co-design of how the coaching programme was implemented, meant the priority of relational development was designed in through the principle of co-design. Sharon's reflections show how her personal goal helped her achieve the design commitment and it all made sense to her.

Outcomes

Sharon took part in the leadership coaching intervention during a period of complex change in her locality. She led a team that was implementing a new cross-agency method for assessing pre-school speech and language development. She described the coaching programme as 'inspirational' and

‘transformational’. Her story of change echoes themes that we found in the wider programme of work in Greater Manchester around the impact of the programme on professional interactions and team relationships, particularly for new or integrated teams.

In a context of intense change and uncertainty, maintaining motivation amongst her team, which included new team members and members whose job roles had changed, was a particular challenge for Sharon, and she used the leadership coaching programme to guide her in supporting her team. Her goal was to move from what she perceived as a task-orientated and reactive leadership style towards a practice of ‘sitting back and listening and thinking before I respond and react’. Sharon identified that the outcomes she particularly valued from the coaching were being able to listen to the concerns of her team, to support them to be actively involved in decision making, and to build strong team relationships. She explains:

We've gone through a change and the change, even though we're a lot busier, we're a smaller leadership team than we were [...] So we have a lot of stuff that we need to get done, but I still think there's time to sit back and reflect and that's what I try to do now [...] speaking to the team about how we're gonna do it rather than ‘this is what we're doing and this is how we're gonna do it’. Now I'm sort of turning that around a bit. So it's like, ‘we've been asked to think about this, how would you think we want to do it?’ and going forward, I've really tried to involve them in aspects of this communication and language assessment implementation. (Sharon)

Sharon's leadership, combined with her team themselves participating in the coaching, have contributed to team development: ‘So I think probably the two things together really have created a bit of a more harmonious team [...] So I think that's been a real benefit for our team, a real benefit.’ The strategic lead in Berkshley spoke of the potential benefits of leadership coaching to integrated teams going forwards particularly around their priority work area of the communication and language assessment:

the [early years] practitioners that [my colleague] manages will be using the [health] trust systems. And so there's a lot of language of us and you and yours and ours and it's gonna take ages to stop that. But behind that comes some...unfortunate attitude, I suppose. I'm not trying to say that it's all negative, but I think we're all so developed in our own services that actually I think if we can work with the team leaders in the leadership coaching, it'll help them to be more self-aware and aware of others, which I think, it would be a really, a great strength when different systems and approaches are having to come together. (Hannah)

She went on to say:

I think sometimes people are so used to leading that they're pushing forward, aren't they, and they're not necessarily bringing people along with them and that's what I really like about the leadership coaching is it, it does make you sit back and it does make you listen and tune in, and you can't, we've all got those regimented statutory things we've all got to face. And sometimes they become blockers and so I hope this will help people be more in tuned with each other. (Hannah)

Reflecting on the barriers that can be created by heroic leaders, a style which is perhaps inevitable in a system driven by the need to get things done, Hannah is recognising leadership in the everyday practices that will enable a new model of working on the ground.

This case suggests the contribution that the leadership coaching programme can make to creating leaders for new or integrated teams in building professional trust, creating inclusive spaces and developing team identity. The design of the programme enfolded Eva et al.'s quadrant chart; the consultant led elements of the programme (dialogic, video feedback) were place-based and co-designed, and while the work sought improvements in relational safety, it created space for disruptive safe encounters which provided opportunity for new ways of being and new ways of seeing leadership. The programme delivered learning that was itself relational and situated in practice to equip public service leadership to resonate with the principles of relational public services.

Discussion

Reflecting on the wider programme of work in GM and the responses of participants within the leadership coaching sessions, it was the personal development activated by the articulation of goals, which were evidenced through real-world relational encounters, that maintained motivation and then created advocacy for the leadership programme across the lengthy timespan of its implementation. The participants eventually stopped asking for expert models and manuals of leadership development when they realised that they were engaged in an experiential leadership programme. The expertise of the facilitator was in the creation of a generative and safe space for relational development. This approach has the power to renew professional vision and engender relationships that are more than interactional sites for influence and leverage (James, Vincent et al., 2021a; James, Wicker et al., 2021b).

One of the surprising findings from our wider programme of work was the theme of management efficiency. Participants of the programme spoke about improvements in efficiency that arose from changes in supervision, decision making and team management. These concepts were not explicitly discussed during the leadership coaching sessions. On reflection, the commitment to situating the programme within and with the work on the ground may have inadvertently drawn up the management concepts that were a tacit but ever-present framing of practice in the participants' minds. This design factor created balance between consultant centric and context centric development.

Martin Buber (2023), a 20th century Austrian-Israeli philosopher said that human existence is characterised by two fundamental modes of relating: the *I-Thou* relationship and the *I-It* relationship. An *I-It* relationship involves objectification, where we experience the world and others as objects to be analysed, used, or categorised. In contrast, the *I-Thou* relationship is a reciprocal encounter in which individuals meet as whole beings, free from instrumental purposes. Buber states that we oscillate between the two modes (*I-Thou*, *I-It*), but if we approach in the subject-object mode (*I-It*) our learning from the observation is encapsulated in that mode, remaining an 'it' fixed for use in the purpose of the subject's endeavour. According to Buber, "the improvement of the ability to experience and use generally involves a decrease in a man's power to relate" (2023; 92). The *I-It* mode is dominated by causality where, "every event that is either perceivable by the senses and physical or discovered or found in introspection and psychological is considered to be of necessity caused and a cause" (Buber, 2023). Conversely, the world through the *I-Thou* lens (Subject-Subject) is a world of relation in which 'I' and 'You' confront each other freely in reciprocity that is not involved in or tainted by causality. In the relational world, community is built by people standing in a living, reciprocal relationship to the 'You' – which Buber describes as the single living entre which is the 'I' for none. This leadership coaching programme prioritised the creation of relationships that were more than transactional because the value of the other person was seen and felt in the development of oneself and their work (Lowe et al., 2024)

Policy and Practice Recommendations for Relational Public Management

The participants framed their outcomes and impacts from the leadership coaching programme with reference to values, effectiveness, and efficiency. The organisational drive for effectiveness and efficiency were not in the frame during the leadership coaching programme. The concept of encounter, which was introduced through the philosophy of Buber (2023), was a concept that was drawn on from the outset. The participants constantly referred to this concept; it was ever-present. It became normalised in their conceptualisation of the programme – and *they* found a way of showing how relational encounters made them more efficient and effective.

Conclusion

The leadership coaching programme was rooted in the *I-Thou* mode of existence. Commitment to co-design was an epistemological outflow from this philosophical starting position. Relational practice was framed in strengths – a praxis aimed at maintaining a subject-subject relationship. We exist by oscillating between the *I-It* existence and the *I-Thou* existence, but greater appreciation to the *I-Thou* as the mode for delivering learning and development might create more effective relational practice in statutory systems more quickly. This programme of work was made possible by the political and strategic commitments for relational reform in Greater Manchester.

Our programme did not dichotomise collective/individual leadership – we cannot easily map our design on a quadrant, yet we see the value of articulating the design elements. Our programme was built on a philosophy of relatedness and the academic expertise that underpinned it was rooted in the alignment between the philosophical paradigm, the design choices and praxis. The movement towards a relational public sector needs courage to break with tradition and create radical new ways of seeing leadership, choices that can resist the waves of causal undercurrents that have saturated public sector management.

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