

Developing Apprentice Senior Leaders – challenging and reinforcing the hegemony of the heroic leader?

Doris Schedlitzki

University of the West of England

The recent introduction of the Apprenticeship levy in the UK has brought a potentially significant change for the world of part-time leadership and management education. Since April 2017, the HMRC has been collecting a new monthly tax from employers with a salary bill of more than 3m. This 'levy' is intended to work as an incentive for large employers to invest strategically and significantly in the development of their workforce. They can only use the funds paid into the levy by sending their employees onto apprenticeships that aim to holistically develop employees' knowledge, skills and behaviours against an Occupational Standard designed by employer trailblazer groups and scrutinized by the new Institute for Apprenticeships. Whilst some employers have been writing off the levy contribution as an additional tax, others are now exclusively funding all learning and development activities through their levy contributions. Training and education providers thus have no choice but to align their own programmes and qualifications in line with this new Apprenticeship framework. Under this new framework, apprenticeships are now also available at degree level, where standards such as the Senior Leader Masters Degree Apprenticeship are delivered through an MBA or MSc programme. Whilst the delivery of work-based degree programmes is not new for Universities as leadership and management education providers, the experience of developing towards a fixed benchmark setting out who a senior leader is, what they should know, be able to do and behave is certainly a significant change.

In this developmental paper, I draw on initial experiences from working with Apprentices on an MBA programme delivered as a Senior Leader Masters Degree Apprenticeship at a UK University to explore the potential power dynamics and tensions on such programmes between the developmental language of 'Apprenticeships' and the imposition of a fixed, written down benchmark in the form of a 'Standard'. The notion of being an apprentice is often rooted in the socio-cultural and historical context of lifelong learning leading to occupational mastery as its end-goal. Whilst the apprenticeship as a programme of skills development is temporal and usually bound to only a few years of an employees working life, it can be seen to be potentially tied to this ideology of mastery as an achievement through lifelong learning. Leadership development scholars have for some time now argued that in order to get away from the popular idea of being a great leader by following 10 easy steps, we may need to embrace and promote the notion of "leader becoming" (Kempster and Stewart, 2010) as an ongoing – lifelong – process of situated learning (in the classroom and everyday work life). Yet, particularly at senior leadership levels, this focus on reflective practice may be perceived to stand in contrast with the assumed organisational need for leaders and managers to be innately experienced, omniscient and make quick, decisive decisions based on rational logic. It is certainly incongruent with dominant leadership discourses focussed on the heroic individual leader setting the strategic direction and having 'all the answers' (Schedlitzki et al., 2017).

This is where the new Apprenticeship framework in the UK with its focus on holistic, sustainable leader development measured through the completion of a portfolio of evidence which requires ongoing critical reflection could challenge the hegemony of the decisive, omniscient heroic leader discourse. Indeed, it may provide an opportunity to develop sustainable leadership practices and decision-making through the delivery of programmes where leadership learning is firmly embedded in work-

based practices and critical self-reflection. Yet, this ideological aim of apprenticeships to embed the idea of lifelong learning and sustainable, reflective practice into leadership and management education is somewhat in tension with the very concrete and fixed nature of the apprenticeship standard. It sets out in 'black and white' who a senior leader should be and only those who can evidence that they indeed know all the things and are able to do all the things and behave in exactly the way that the standard sets out will be able to complete their apprenticeships. Apprentices have to prove and evidence their development not only on programme but also at an end-point assessment event and in front of an independent assessor, thereby going through a symbolic ritual that they leave with a stamp of having successfully become a senior leader. As such, the standard and end-point assessment ritual work as a disciplinary mechanisms that regulate and control (Carroll and Levy, 2010; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013) the apprentices emerging leader identity.

Drawing on initial experiences from an MBA Senior Leadership Masters Degree Apprenticeship programme, I will explore how these power dynamics play out and focus on tensions occurring between the developmental language of apprenticeships and the regulatory nature of the Apprenticeship Standard. Of particular interest here are the lived experiences of participants who try to translate the abstract language of the standard into their everyday life. The leadership and management standards bear the imprint of the organisational discourses of large, private sector employers. The translation into the workplace and personal identity development may thus be particularly problematic for those who work in contexts that do not share this discourse. As such, I will further reflect on participants lived experiences and explore the interplay of resistance and conformity in their attempts to develop towards this ideal standard.

References

- Carroll B and Levy L (2010) Leadership development as identity construction. *Management Communication Quarterly* 24(2): 211-231
- Kempster, S. and Stewart, J. (2010) Becoming a leader: a co-produced autoethnographic exploration of situated learning of leadership practice, *Management Learning*, Vol. 41(2), pp. 205-219
- Nicholson, H. and Carroll, B. (2013) Identity undoing and power relations in leadership development. *Human Relations*, 66(9): 1225-1248
- Schedlitzki, D., Edwards, G. and Kempster, S. (2017) The absent follower: Identity construction within organisationally assigned leader–follower relations, *Leadership*, published online first.