

Leadership and the Asymmetrical Politics of Blame

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Abstract

This paper shares reflections from an action research project being conducted with a large city police service in the UK.¹

The expression 'blame culture' is frequently used to characterise organizational experience, especially in the public sector, where mistakes and failures tend to be more open to political, regulatory and media scrutiny than in other sectors. Whether it is the experience or the anticipation of blame that motivates defensive action, the 'blame culture' is said to inhibit both individual and organizational learning (Vince and Saleem, 2004), and is associated with emotions of disappointment, shame, guilt and rejection (Clancy et al. 2012).

Viewed through the prism of neo-liberalism, the 'blame culture' is not (or not just) a collective, relational phenomenon, but an individualisation of failure, too (Baker and Kelan, 2018). The neo-liberal subject focuses on the enterprise of the self, and when mistakes happen (as inevitably they must), blame is directed inwards. Such self-blame is produced and reinforced by a range of individualising discourses which are now part of everyday organizational rhetoric, such as 'empowerment', 'enablement', and the importance of a 'learning mindset' for the 'reflective practitioner'.

When we started this project, we probably assumed either that any such internalisation of blame would be relatively evenly spread across the organization, or that fear of blame would flow down the hierarchy and be felt especially powerfully amongst junior, front-line officers, especially since police stress and burnout are associated with the fear of being the subject of an internal affairs investigation, that is, of being made to pay an often career-terminating price for one's mistakes (e.g., Gershon et al. 2009).

¹ By the time of the conference, we will hopefully be able to share the identity of the service in question to help bring this case to life.

Our early findings suggest something different, namely that there is an asymmetry in the 'blame culture', which concentrates self-blame and self-responsibility with operational leaders (defined here as Commander rank). In our data, we are finding striking examples of operational leaders choosing the most excoriating self-criticism from the many different interpretive options available to them, that is, blaming themselves when many other feasible explanations and attributions are available (countering some of the long-established tenets of attribution theory). These interpretive patterns are not, so far, being replicated with more junior officers, who - with considerable justification - blame poor or non-existent training, inadequate equipment, staff shortages, an out-of-touch internal investigations unit, and ever-increasing workload, before they reach for the sort of explanations and reflections from which they themselves might learn and improve.

Thus, there appears to be a very particular asymmetry of blame that is of direct concern to/for operational leaders. Such leaders seem to be absorbing a disproportionate amount of the 'blame culture' dynamic, and are caught in the cross-fire between discourses of responsibility, such as the autonomous, psychological 'learning mindset' and the effects of budget cuts which contribute to almost the opposite of this autonomous self, namely a sense of helplessness. Operational leaders may 'enjoy' considerable power in a traditional sense of prestige and position, but the personal cost of this concentration of self-blame is probably immense.

With this paper, we connect with several themes in critical leadership studies. We illustrate that 'leadership' is not some unitary phenomenon that only few experience at the top of the hierarchy, nor something which is the opposite of 'followership'. Leaders are themselves followers, especially in the public services, where complex hierarchies and matrices are supplemented with many other stakeholders, including politicians, regulators and an ever-watchful media. We do not claim that 'leadership is everywhere' (as might be implied by 'distributed leadership' or the 'leaderful organization'), because the Commanders in our study are not simply managers who have been re-badged as leaders. They are leaders (a) because from the perspective of front-line officers, these Commanders *are* their 'leaders', and anyone further up the hierarchy is more 'politician' than 'leader', and (b) because they carry what, in our assessment, constitutes a leadership load, e.g., numbers of reports; size of budgets; degree of public accountability and visibility; and implications of failure.

When the politics of action research, i.e., close collaboration with practitioners, is raised in the academy (e.g., in the Ethics Committee), it is often connected with a fear of having to dilute one's message and not be too critical of one's corporate or institutional sponsors/partners.

Our work highlights a more *personal* politics of such academic/practitioner partnerships, insofar as seeing the challenges that leaders face at close quarters helps us to empathise with them. Such empathy is not to subscribe to an excessively positive, heroic or adulatory view of leadership, but reminds us that leaders are human beings, most of whom do not intend to wield their power unjustly or toxically. Empathising, perhaps even identifying, with the subjective aspects of these asymmetrical power dynamics is important if we want to influence leadership practice. Being critical of leadership does not have to mean criticising leaders. Instead, it encourages us to create spaces of mutual trust in which sometimes difficult reflections and conversations can be aired. We thereby hope to connect with those who emphasise the politics of emotion, as something which is felt by the individual human being and/but produced and performed collectively and culturally. With an asymmetry of blame, leaders may be performing an emotional task on behalf of the wider organisation, indeed, wider society, which is a very particular, perhaps hidden, expression of subjugation.

References

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