Seeking Sustainability Leadership

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"There are two types of education… One should teach us how to make a living, and the other how to live."

John Adams (1780)

"Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife."

John Dewey (1916)

Introduction

As people who have worked for some decades to help a fundamental shift in capitalism for a more sustainable and fair economy, we were somewhat relieved to hear more executives acknowledge that the current efforts are not enough. According to Accenture and the UN Global Compact, only a third of CEOs of the world's 1000 largest firms think that business is making sufficient efforts to address global sustainability challenges or that the global economy is on track to meet growing demands for employment and consumption (Accenture, 2013). Take any major issue, and the innovations at firm level are dwarfed by data on deteriorating circumstances. For instance, we might be encouraged that solar power will soon be cheaper than coal, but harrowed by how aggregate carbon emissions rise every year (IPCC, 2014).

This growing realisation that incremental change might be insignificant change may be one reason why we now hear calls for more leadership for sustainability (Adams et al, 2011). One study found over 50 new sustainability leadership courses, in English, around the world: "colleges and universities are rushing to respond to an increasingly urgent challenge: developing the next generation of sustainability leaders" (Shriberg and MacDonald, 2013, p 1). The international Academy for Business in Society's conference in 2014 focused on 'Leadership for a Sustainable Future'. Hosted at the University of Cambridge's Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL), the organisers noted that "progress may well depend on the emergence of political, economic and intellectual leadership far beyond what is currently in evidence" (ABIS, 2014a). The director of CISL went further, stating "If companies stand any chance of meaningfully embedding sustainability policies and principles into business practices and performance, they must invest in integrating sustainability into their mainstream leadership and management development programmes" (Courtice, 2014).

So the search for sustainability leadership is now on. Where will this leadership come from? What will it look like? How can we see more of it? Our experience is that people are calling for more leadership without reflecting on what leadership means, and also, when they do, too often relying on mainstream management discourses about leadership. This is reflected in research of sustainability leadership programmes, where their "directors, most of whom have a sustainability background but not a leadership background, had difficulty answering the question of how their programs differed from traditional leadership programs." (Shriberg and MacDonald, 2013, p 12). Our argument is that as educators and researchers in fields related to sustainability, we should not simply seek to add more sustainability to leadership or add more leadership to sustainability, but challenge assumptions about "leadership" that have added to the persistent social and environmental problems we experience today.

In this paper we briefly outline the importance of the field of leadership education, before defining our focus as leadership behaviours, rather than individual leaders with senior roles. We understand leadership as a relational, 'socially constructed' phenomenon rather than the result of a stable set of leadership attributes that inhere in 'leaders' (Wood, 2005). We will describe the growth of 'sustainability leadership' as a topic in the field of business-society relations and its associated research community, as well as a topic for increasing numbers of degree programmes around the world. We will describe some of the major shortcomings of the approaches to leadership and its development which are currently mainstream within business schools, and why that is so, before outlining a more critical approach. We conclude by presenting a couple of the orientations that we aim to cultivate in participants in our leadership development programmes. In so doing, we hope to inform discussions on the future development of research, advice and education on sustainability leadership.

Leadership and its Development

Leadership is a subject offered in most business schools worldwide as well as a variety of management trainers. The focus of these courses is often on personal development to prepare oneself for greater seniority within an organisation, which makes it attractive to many students and educators. The popularity of the field is reflected by the University of Cumbria asking one of your authors in 2012 to found an Institute for Leadership and Sustainability (IFLAS). The subject has a range of journals dedicated to it, including *Leadership*, *The Leadership Quarterly* and *Journal of Leadership Studies,* as well as being a subject often covered in journals like *Organisation* or *Human Relations*. Recently, articles have examined the growing field of leadership development courses offered to executives. "One estimate cites a $45 billion annual expenditure in the United States alone for leadership development and a survey of European CEOs found that the majority were 'extremely' committed to leadership development" (Gagnon and Collinson, 2014, p. 648). Mabey and Finch-Lees (2008) found that leadership development programmes comprise a "potent and high-profile human resources activity, involving some of the organization's key players and attracting high investment both in terms of corporate budgets and expectations" (p. 3).

There are so many definitions of leadership, which makes it hard to pick one, so we will offer one of our own: Leadership is any behaviour that has the effect of helping groups of people achieve something that the majority of them are pleased with and which we assess as significant and what they would not have otherwise achieved. Therefore leadership involves the ascription of significance to an act by us, the observer, where significance usually involves our assumptions or propositions about values and theories of change. If our theory of change is that the CEO has freedom of action and can impose change, then we would naturally look for leadership to be exhibited at that level. If our values are that profit-maximising for shareholders in the near term is a good goal, then we would not question a CEO's "leadership" if achieving such goals. We should note that these are rather big 'Ifs'.

In the same way it is us the observer that attributes "leadership" to a behaviour that we observe, rather than a behaviour having an intrinsic quality that we happen to call leadership, so it is the same with recognising a "leader." We might see someone as a "leader" when we perceive they have done something to help others do useful and significant things that they would not have done otherwise. But does this mean we are assuming that "leader" is a stable characteristic of a person? Perhaps something intrinsic to them? Both leadership and leader are our own narratives about a self, rather than something real in the world independent of our descriptions. As Gergen (1994) explained well, "narratives of the self are not personal impulses made social, but social processes realised on the site of the personal." The truth about leaders and leadership are not things to be discovered, but processes of social construction, and reflect our own discourses and preoccupations

at any given time. By virtue of nature, nurture or circumstance, some people are better suited to certain activities than others, but the labelling of such actions as leadership and such people as leaders is dependent on what we are choosing to mean by such terms and choosing to recognise and ignore in any situation.

Sustainability Meets Leadership

The process of social construction in the field of leadership has been a creative one, often lucrative, with now at least a hundred adjectives added to leadership to describe individual intentions, the behaviours involved, or the nature of the outcomes. Some of the more interesting adjectives that have sparked great followings are Servant, Democratic, Authentic, Situational and Transformational.

Leadership is increasingly prefixed by the word 'sustainability'. Usually when discussing sustainability leadership, people focus on the stated goal of the leadership or the outcome, which relates to varying conceptions of sustainable development, or greater resilience in the face of environmental disruptions. Less so at present do people focus on the behaviours during leadership, such as the ethical frameworks involved or the embodied values (was she wearing an ethically-made suit when she fired the staff?). A definition of sustainability leadership that builds on the earlier definition of leadership, and encompasses intention, act and outcome, while delaying disputes on the nature of sustainable development, could be as follows:

Sustainability leadership is any ethical behaviour that has the intention and effect of helping groups of people achieve environmental or social outcomes that we assess as significant and that they would not have otherwise achieved.

Recent analysis of sustainability leadership has listed both traits and competencies that individual leaders need to exhibit. One of the few academic studies on sustainability leadership describes a rather large task:

"Leadership for sustainability requires leaders of extraordinary abilities. These are leaders who can read and predict through complexity, think through complex problems, engage groups in dynamic adaptive organisational change and have the emotional intelligence to adaptively engage with their own emotions associated with complex problem solving" (Metcalf and Benn 2013).

This analysis implies we need more remarkable individuals to turn the tide of unsustainability. Although this could imply we need lots of clever people to apply themselves to the problem, such an analysis and can have the opposite effect, of emphasising the role of exceptional individual leaders at the expense of collective, collaborative and democratic efforts. Leadership, we would argue, is a necessary function in such efforts, but as an enabling, distributed form of action.

The University of Cambridge conducted a study of leadership development programmes from a perspective that analysed them for their implications for greater organisational sustainability. "Very few of the companies we interviewed had achieved integration of sustainability into the curriculum design of their formal executive development programmes. And even in the few instances where this was the case, the inclusion of sustainability tended to be rather reactive, in the form of bolt-on modules or sessions – the sustainability director or by an outside speaker – rather than an integrated theme that permeated the whole development process and reflected the world-view of the company and the top leadership vision" (Courtice, 2014).

After attending or analysing a number of leadership development courses offered by top business schools, we have experienced similar limitations, and worse. Most courses are a mix of content from academics from across disciplines that are available to the course director, some 'old males tales' about insights gained from a high-level career, some uncritical and rather boring case studies of 'successful' CEOs or entrepreneurs, and finally some group discussions on leadership that draw from

the latest popular leadership theories, without any critical deconstruction of them. After analysing these courses and their leadership texts, we have come to the view that mainstream corporate and academic assumptions about leadership are fundamentally flawed and sustainability professionals should not accept them uncontested. Therefore, for projects that seek to add more sustainability to leadership development (Rogan and DeCew, 2014) or "identify barriers to and opportunities for the integration of sustainability into corporate leadership training and development programmes" (ABIS, 2014b) there is a need to challenge the most basic assumptions of what leadership is and how it can be developed. Otherwise, a focus on integrating sustainability into leadership development could create unfounded delusions of how one can encourage organisational and sectoral change towards social or environmental goals. We realise these may seem bold statements, and so we will now explain what some of the failings of mainstream leadership discourses are, and the implications for taking a different approach.

The Un-Sustainability of Leadership

One of the characteristics of mainstream leadership discussion is an implicit hero-focus. Most popular literature on leadership and most leadership development addresses individuals in senior roles, as if only senior leaders exhibit leadership, and as if their leadership is always a key factor shaping outcomes. Psychological research since the 1980s has demonstrated that people, across cultures, tend to over-attribute significance to the actions of senior leaders, when compared to other factors shaping outcomes (Meindl et al, 1985). The researchers concluded that this was evidence that we are susceptible to seeing “leadership” when it isn’t necessarily there or important - a collectively constructed ‘romantic discourse’. Their work reflects the ‘false attribution effect’, widely reported by social psychologists, as people's tendency to place an undue emphasis on internal characteristics to explain someone’s behaviour, rather than considering external factors (Jones and Harris, 1967). Perhaps our particular susceptibility to this effect when considering leadership is because we are brought up with stories of great leaders shaping history (it is easier to tell stories that way), and this myth is perpetuated by our business media today. Every business magazine applauds their heroes. For instance, in 1996, Jeff Skilling was described in Fortune Magazine article as, “the most intellectually brilliant executive in the natural-gas business” and received years of praise for his leadership of Enron from that magazine, before serving time in a Chicago jail for fraud at the company (Brady, 2010).

This over-attribution of importance to a “leader” is an obstacle to our understanding change towards sustainability, as it can curtail our analysis of why situations exist, and it undermines the potential of that vast majority without senior roles, as the implication is that they can’t shape outcomes. The way we over attribute importance to leaders also means we ignore that leadership is context-dependent rather than a fixed quality and behaviour of an individual. Our boss may be good at some things in some situations, but leadership can usefully be thought of as emergent, distributed and episodic, with different people contributing at different times (Raelin, 2003; Starhawk, 1987). These are reasons why Gemmil and Oakley (2011) argue “Leadership is a myth that functions to reinforce existing social beliefs and structures about the necessity of hierarchy and leaders in organizations … a serious sign of social pathology, a special case of a myth that induces massive learned helplessness among members of a social system.”

This obsession with a special boss leads to the second approach to leadership analysis that is important to avoid - the desired traits, or personality characteristics, of a leader. Try an internet news search for leader traits and the popularity of this approach will be instantly apparent. Yet it is flawed as most of the traits identified as key for leaders, such as empathy or self-efficacy, are key for anyone who is remotely capable. In addition, we aren’t fixed beings but act in different ways in different contexts and change over time. The damaging consequence of a focus on traits is that it suggests some are born to be the boss of a hierarchy and need to be selected to do so, rather than

consider what forms of hierarchy or non-hierarchy can elicit the best group behaviours to achieve desired goals.

Another main focus in mainstream leadership development is self-justification, which often masquerades as self-exploration. The current popularity of 'Authentic Leadership' reflects this approach, where executives are encouraged to seek coherence between their life story and seeking or holding a senior role in a corporation (George, et al, 2007). The potential benefits are more self-confidence, appearing more authentic in one's job, and enhanced skills of public oratory. Rather than self-exploration, these processes can be characterised as a process of self-justification, as the exploration of self is framed by the aim of constructing narratives that explain one's right to seniority within a corporation – an almost 'divine' right to lead. Having participated in such processes, we did not find encouragement for self-realisations that might undermine one's ability to work for certain firms, or transform the basis of one's self-worth, or challenge one's assumption of self-efficacy.

This approach ignores insights from critical sociology that shows how our perspectives and sense of self are shaped by language and discourse, operating through mass media and various forms of social communication (Fairclough, 1989). Such insights challenge the view that we can achieve depths of "self-awareness" through only reflecting on our experiences and feelings without the input of different social theories. If your analysis is that unsustainability is a product of our existing social norms and economic structures, then helping each other free ourselves from mainstream delusions about reality and success must be a starting point for any self-leadership. The practices of "Authentic Leadership" development are similar to those used in the broader field of "transformational leadership" where leaders are regarded as charismatic individuals who create change in organisations to achieve higher purposes (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999).

We are not arguing that there is no place for authentic or transformational leadership development. In some cases, particularly for those lacking self-confidence or coming from disadvantaged communities, there are benefits from developing self-efficacy in typical ways. However, the focus on heroic leadership, key traits, and self-justification in much leadership development within business schools arises due to the assumption that captains of industry must control, rather than liberate, normal people and nature. That is the 'managerialist' mindset that identifies "us", the bosses, as people who need to manage "them", the unruly masses, to achieve goals, rather than celebrate and coach our participation in the evolving multitude of life. It is a mindset descended from the so-called 'scientific management' that emerged in the 1940s and treats staff like mechanical parts (Rost, 1997). It is a mindset that is causing us to alienate ourselves from nature and each-other, and therefore is a mindset at the root of unsustainability (Eisenstein, 2013).

Our view is that mainstream leadership concepts and education are flawed due to reflecting a confluence, in the West, of three great 20th century flows: one, scientific management and the perfection of panoptic managerialism; second, an addiction to fantasies of individual potency and a corresponding distrust, notwithstanding democratic rhetoric, of collaborative, collective forms of deliberation, problem-solving and organisation. The third, the monetisation of every kind of human activity or exchange in a crudely delineated market that displaces democratic social choice. In their mingling, the three form a near-impregnable 'common-sense', which is often voiced in what Giacalone and Politslo (2013) call 'econophonic' language (where financial calculation dominates) and 'potensiphonic' language (where the emphasis is on individual power). This voice tells us - with typical phrases such as "at the end of the day, when push comes to shove, in the real world" – that without strong leadership, nothing will ever get done. From that perspective "strong" leadership is assumed to be the opposite of something weak and equivocal that might involve collective deliberation and argument in the public sphere. With these assumptions underpinning corporate cultures it is less surprising that psychologists find there to be an above-average rate of people with psychopathic tendencies in corporate executive roles (Bendell, 2002).

A search for sustainability leadership and its development can begin by setting aside these dominant assumptions about strength as well as the idea of the senior leader, to consider leadership as something shared, an episodic social process for participation in which we can all become competent. Therefore we do not agree with those who argue for building upon existing leadership theories like transformational leadership (Shriberg and MacDonald, 2013), unless that is done with a critical perspective and experimental method.

Seeking Sustainability Leadership Along Other Paths

Our arguments on sustainability leadership build upon a range of scholarship that is coming to be known as 'Critical Leadership Studies', which critiques mainstream assumptions, in society and in academia, of what leadership involves. Such scholarship addresses the social and political effects of socially constructed notions and practices of leadership, to the 'romance of leadership' whereby magical thinking about leaders may infantilise people while creating a strong illusion of empowerment and to leadership as a gendered practice and to the development of leadership as 'identity work' that shapes people's sense of their organisational roles (Birkeland, 1993). By 'critical leadership', we do not mean, like Jenkins (2012), the application systematic logical thought by senior role holders. Rather, we draw upon the sociological understanding of "critical" as involving the deconstruction of widespread discourses and assumptions that are maintained by, and perpetuate, certain power relations (Sutherland et al, 2014).

Fortunately for the development of sustainability leadership, practical implications from Critical Leadership Studies can be developed and applied in leadership development. In addition, important examples of different forms of leadership are found in some environmental organisations (Egri and Herman, 2000), activist communities (Sutherland et al, 2014), and are exhibited by some senior executives. The late Ray Anderson, when he was CEO of Interface, exhibited a different approach to sustainability leadership to that widely taught today. In a gathering organised by Impact International he explained how he appreciated that the goal of transforming the company towards zero emissions would be something that all employees would be inspired by when recognising it was about their own families and communities. He knew that the existing hierarchies and systems would likely restrict their efforts to achieve that goal. He knew the vision would be compelling and colleagues would discover how to achieve it, because "we weren't making carpet tiles any more, we were transforming industry and commerce." "Management was likely to be the biggest obstacle" he said. "It was down to me to make sure that nothing would prevent people taking this on and using their imaginations" (Anderson, 2007).

There are many other business leaders we can learn from, yet many of the leadership behaviours that need to be cultivated will be found outside the C-suite and also outside the corporate sector altogether, in non-profits, social enterprises, cooperatives and activist networks (Sutherland et al, 2014). For instance, some non-profit environmental leaders have been found to espouse and practice personal values that are more "ecocentric, open to change, and self-transcendent" than business managers (Egri and Herman, 2000). Future research on sustainability leadership and how to develop it, could usefully focus on non-corporate leadership behaviours and seek to integrate these with general leadership development.

On the basis of a critical deconstruction of leadership discourses, our assessment of what is useful for organisational change, and an awareness of the imperatives of wider sustainability, social justice and personal dignity, we have identified twelve key "orientations" that we seek to promote amongst participants of our leadership development courses and coaching. We call them orientations rather than attributes, competencies or capabilities, as they describe areas for ongoing attention and evolution, rather than achieving a level of performance. This Turning Point article is not the place to

explore all these orientations, but we want to describe for you two of them that relate to the limitations of mainstream leadership that we described above.

Instead of a focus on heroes with great traits, to develop sustainability leadership we can enhance our understanding of how to develop leaderful groups, where senior role holders act as hosts not heroes, and enable leadership to emerge from within the group (Raelin, 2003). We call this orientation “group literacy”. It arises from a desire to help a group better serve a social purpose, understanding why groups malfunction and what forms of intervention can help them function better.

For this kind of leadership we can gain useful insights from how professional facilitators work to help groups function well. Some analysis suggests that groups malfunction due to misunderstandings of, or lack of attention to, either meaning, values or structure (Heron, 1999). Problems in the domain of meaning include a sense of purposelessness, confusion, with unclear or disputed goals, ‘goal displacement’ untested assumptions, and misunderstandings. Problems in the domain of values can generate alienation, exclusion, pessimism, disrespect, cultural misunderstanding, domination or dependency, and disengagement. Problems in the domain of structure can involve a structure-task mismatch, role confusion, secrecy, unnecessary bureaucracy, lack of resources, no timelines or milestones, or too many. Leadership can therefore involve participants in a group noticing which domain is in need of attention, and stepping up to seek to address that, and then stepping back when that particular task is done. ‘Group literacy’ requires knowing what good facilitation is, and helping that function occur within the group, while conscious of the limitations that arise for one if taking on such a role. Another aspect of this approach is to encourage assessment of how a group is functioning as an organ of leadership, both of itself and a wider group of stakeholders. Groups may appear leaderless to some observers but achieve leadership of themselves and others (Sutherland, et al, 2014).

A second orientation that we seek to cultivate is ‘self-construal’. Instead of processes of self-exploration being managed towards self-justification, we encourage deeper self-construal where no outcome is hoped for. As one recent student on the Post Graduate Certificate in Sustainable Leadership explained to us, her tutors, we offered "an existential provocation demanding full emotional engagement within a democratic and nurturing community." Enabling this type of self-exploration involves insights from critical sociology, psychology, philosophy and spiritual traditions, as well as deep conversations, group work and experiences in nature. Such exploration must be done responsibly, sensitive to the participant’s willingness to explore.

The almost required optimism of a sustainability profession seeking favour with mainstream economic powers can be a barrier to engaging in this form of leadership development, because it does not provide space to explore insights that might prove difficult to existing institutions, discourses and income streams. Another barrier to a depth of reflection is the widespread denial that recent climate science might imply it is too late to avoid abrupt climate change (Foster, 2014). In our experience, many professionals are wedded to the idea of progress, and that at personal and collective levels we are ‘moving forward.’ This is also true with people working on sustainability. Yet being able to allow a sense of despair at a lack of progress, or any progress as traditionally conceived, is important to allow true self-exploration that might involve letting go of past assumptions about oneself and society. It is about moving from a leadership as desperate heroes to divine hosts. We use the word divine, as ultimately a discussion of leadership becomes one of purpose, which makes it an issue involving the deepest questions facing us, the meaning of our lives, our species, and the cosmic plan or comic fluke we call planet Earth.

Despite our criticisms of the assumptions and approaches of ‘authentic leadership’ and ‘transformational leadership’, the focus on self-development within these mainstream leadership development practices provides an opening for work on the deeper personal transformations that

might enable more leadership for sustainability. In addition, the question of purpose is now receiving greater attention from leadership scholars, without that purpose being assumed to be congruent with narrowly defined corporate goals (Kempster, et al 2011). To be useful for sustainability, we believe leadership development needs to avoid the seductive construction of self-efficacy within an assumed and progressing cultural and economic system. Instead, educators can to reconnect with the timeless essence of education as enabling greater freedom (Dewey, 1916), and thus focus on encouraging students to openly and critically explore notions of self and society. Brazilian teacher Paulo Freire (1970) wrote that education is either an exercise in domestication or liberation. If as educators we have come to the understanding that current paradigms of thought in economy and society are fundamentally inhibiting our ability to live in more sustainable ways, then education for liberation is key part of developing leadership for sustainability (Bendell, 2014).

The growing backlash against mainstream University courses from some successful entrepreneurs, such as Peter Thiel (2014), could be due to a lack of both critical and empowering education at many Universities today. The enterprise-oriented training that he and other entrepreneurs advocate will be unlikely to enable shifts in consciousness that we are seeing in participants in our courses and so we see an important and wonderful role for Universities in years to come if more academics embrace their unique role. To help, we will continue to document and share the twelve orientations that we seek to promote through our leadership education, as well as the future results from evaluations of graduate performance, where participants invite colleagues to anonymously assess them before and after the course.

Conclusions

In this paper we have critiqued mainstream leadership and leadership development approaches in the hope of better grounding the emerging field of sustainability leadership. "Sustainability leadership cannot be taught solely with traditional leadership theory" argue Shriberg and MacDonald (2013, p18). In this paper, we have gone further, by arguing that traditional leadership theory is highly problematic to the pursuit of sustainability leadership. Their study of sustainability leadership programmes found that “this emerging area suffers from a lack of common frameworks, methods and metrics” (Shriberg and MacDonald, 2013, p 17). We agree that more learning between practitioners in sustainability leadership development is important, and our paper contributes in making clear some problems with existing mainstream approaches to leadership. Without a critical view on leadership, the emerging area of incorporating sustainability into existing leadership development might repeat the same mistake that had led to sustainable business efforts being largely ineffectual in changing the direction of our economies. That mistake was trying to incorporate sustainability into the mainstream, rather than analysing and transforming those aspects of the mainstream that are driving mal-development (Bendell and Doyle, 2014).

We hope, with Courtice (2014) of CISL, that "as sustainability becomes more strategic, we expect mainstream leadership development programmes to change quite radically: to become more proactive (rather than responsive) and to put the individual’s development into a much richer global context shaped by social and environmental trends and emerging norms." However, this should not mean accepting the discourses of leadership that currently dominate.

After years of educating executives on sustainability leadership, it is our conviction that neither seeking to add leadership to sustainability practice or more sustainability to leadership practice is sufficient, because that could reinforce a set of ideas about leadership that are part of a corporate system that has contributed to social and environmental malaise. Instead, we can draw upon critical perspectives on leadership to dismantle unhelpful ideologies of hierarchy and power, and empower far more people to exhibit leadership for sustainability in many ways and at many levels.

Therefore our search for sustainability leadership must begin with unlearning leadership as it's currently assumed and most often taught. Templates for sustainability leadership won't be found within the walls of schools focused on corporate elites. Instead, we can widen our search to include critical sociology, deeper psychological reflection and inspiration from wild nature. The challenge for professionals in sustainability and corporate responsibility, therefore, is now to move beyond their existing expertise in social or environmental content, and explore the fundamentals of leadership and its development from a critical perspective.

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