6. Leadership as Response not Reaction: Wisdom and Mindfulness in Public Sector Leadership

Paul Atkins

Introduction

This chapter concerns the development of cognitive and emotional capabilities of leaders in the public sector; in particular, the capacity to respond rather than react automatically to challenging events, described herein as ‘mindfulness’. The chapter aims to make the case:

- a. That key differences in the complexity of cognitive and emotional processing are not stylistic but developmental. Although difficult, it is possible for leaders to learn to think and feel in more complex ways; and
- b. That the cultivation of mindfulness in particular may well be associated with this development.

In essence, the chapter argues that the failure to think complexly is a problem for public sector and political leadership and that the cultivation of mindfulness may form part of the solution.

The chapter begins by outlining key theoretical beliefs embodied in the psychological perspective that informs this work, then outlines what mental complexity might look like in the context of a senior public servant. Two key developmental pathologies are then described (over and under-differentiation) and linked to senior leadership in Australia by considering Judith Brett’s (2007) analysis of John Howard’s term as prime minister. Finally, the possible implications of mindfulness training in the development of mental complexity are considered and related to leadership. The chapter concludes with a brief consideration of some key factors working against the development of mental complexity in public sector and political leaders.

The dynamics of mental development

In this section I present a set of theoretical assumptions underpinning the work to follow. Given space limitations, these assumptions are presented without great elaboration although each has supporting literature.

- a. Human beings must self-regulate physically, cognitively and emotionally in response to environmental challenge (Carver and Scheier 1998). For example, in the same way that a leader must physically self-regulate to

- maintain core temperature in the face of fluctuations in air temperature, she must mentally self-regulate in order to maintain a sense of coherence and well-being in the face of conflicts to her beliefs and attitudes. In practice, mental self-regulation involves striving to make sense of experience through fitting it to existing schemas or through the development of new schemas for conceptualising self and the external world.
- b. The active construction of meaning from one's interaction with the socio-physical surround develops across the lifespan such that more mature leaders are able to think, feel and respond (i.e. self-regulate) in more complex ways to environmental challenges (Fischer and Yan 2002; Torbert *et al.* 2004). While psychological development is most rapid in childhood, it can continue throughout adulthood given appropriate challenges and supports (Kegan 1982; 1994).
 - c. The development of mental complexity can be seen as a dialectic process of ever more subtle and complex differentiations and integrations. For example, in the affective domain, wiser individuals are better able to differentiate between subtle emotions and their meanings, and are better able to integrate those emotions with situational demands to act effectively (Labouvie-Vief and Marquez-Gonzalez 2004).¹
 - d. Leaders, like all humans, strive for agency and communion. Agency refers to the need to act effectively to achieve desired ends and communion refers to the need to belong as a valued member of a community (McAdams 1997).

From this set of assumptions, the development of leader wisdom can be seen as the growth of capacity to respond in more complex ways such that the leader can maintain a stable sense of coherence and well-being in the face of increasingly complex challenges. This emphasis on maintaining well-being may seem excessively self-centred to those more accustomed to thinking about interpersonal, organisational, institutional and societal aspects of leadership. And indeed, it is a very partial perspective. However, the bridge from the micro-experience of leadership to more macro aspects arises particularly from assumption d). Coherence and well-being are the outcomes of effectively meeting the interpersonal, organisational and societal challenges of leadership. For the purposes of this chapter, it is useful to take the perspective of the leader looking out and acting at least partially from enlightened self-interest.

We know intuitively that leaders vary in mental complexity. When I ask people what makes a wise leader, they usually cite abilities like a deep understanding of the dynamics of the broader system (particularly the broader social system), a capacity to step back from experience to take a longer term or bigger perspective, an interest in people manifest in a capacity to listen, and a sense of their identity, values and limitations that preserves their integrity and humility through challenges that others might react to defensively. In short, wisdom, in

common parlance, seems to mean a combination of good judgment, effective social action and a resilient sense of self.

Psychological processes underpinning mental complexity

What might mental complexity look like in terms of underlying psychological processes in the context of leadership? Let's use an example to illustrate. Mary is a leader of a major government department in the midst of a significant organisational cultural change effort to increase accountability and devolve decision making. Although generally supported, Mary is frequently engaged in heated disagreements with both her senior management team and her minister. Mary is confident in the direction she is taking, having successfully deputised during a similar organisational change in a different department. Her perception is that current criticisms of her arise from concerns among stakeholders about short-term costs of the change when her actions are designed to bring about long-term benefits.

Change happens (or not) through a series of conversations between Mary and key stakeholders including her senior management team, her minister, members of other departments, clients and so on. Many of these conversations are difficult, in the sense that they will directly challenge the way that Mary is seeing the world, potentially threatening her sense of her own capability to bring about the change and even her worth. Consider, for a moment, what emotional complexity might look like in the face of this situation. Mary must be able to:

- identify subtle differences between emotions and the informational signals these differences convey;
- predict the progression of emotions such that she can anticipate the effects of different actions;
- accept and regulate sometimes strong and painful emotions within herself to achieve desired ends;
- take the perspective of others, to anticipate and discern their emotional responses to her actions;
- modify her actions appropriately to facilitate others keeping their emotional responses at optimal levels for effective action;
- reconcile and integrate conflicting emotions arising from different aspects of the situation;²
- step back from her emotions enough to recognise that other emotional reactions might have also been possible given different interpretations of the situation; and
- even from this somewhat detached position, Mary must be able to honour and use the emotions to help move her in a valued direction, realising her commitments without being attached to her particular anticipation of the ways in which she might get there.

These are just some of the emotional capabilities required. There are also substantial cognitive demands of this situation. For example, as a leader, Mary must be able to disentangle her leadership role from her identity (Linsky and Heifetz 2002; Kets de Vries 2005). Not only does Mary require a finely tuned capacity to identify, predict and regulate different emotions within herself and others, she must also understand the motivations, values and world-views of others; anticipate the dynamics of conversations, patterns of influence and power that typically arise in conflict, and respond accordingly; understand her own strengths, needs and vulnerabilities; sustain herself in body, mind and spirit under stress and maintain a sense of who she is, what she stands for and what she hopes to achieve, not just for herself but for the bigger context in which she operates.

So, a wise leader is someone with sufficient cognitive and emotional complexity to consciously respond, as opposed to automatically react, to increasingly complex challenges. This amounts to a capacity to step back somewhat from experience, to see our experience in context. Rather than being swept up *in* experiences, to *have* experiences. In the terms introduced earlier, we must become more complex by differentiating our own reactions from the observable aspects of experience, allowing us to make choices as opposed to operating on automatic pilot. In simpler terms, to live wisely we must learn to watch our experience while living it.

Before we turn to a consideration of how we might help develop this mental complexity in public-sector leaders, it might be instructive to consider a couple of identifiable ways in which leaders might fail to develop or at least exhibit complexity in response to their experience. These can be seen as dead-ends branching off from the developmental pathway. I argued earlier that psychological development entails more complex forms of self-regulatory capacity such that we are able to maintain equanimity in the face of increasingly complex challenges. Another way to say this is that, faced with new and challenging experiences we must either integrate these with what we already know or we must differentiate new ways of knowing.

Developmental pathologies in leadership

The core processes of differentiation and integration suggest a couple of developmental ‘pathologies’ that seem highly relevant to leadership. First, it is possible to over-differentiate, such that a huge variety of perspectives and possibilities are perceived without the capacity to integrate these with past experience and context in a way that leads to effective action. This type of over-differentiation sees the nuances and relativities in everything but is effectively paralysed by this complexity. We perhaps see this in public sector leaders hamstrung between multiple conflicting points of view, seemingly unable to act in a world rich in context and nuance and, ultimately, electing the most

timid courses of action. From a psychological perspective, this type of leader is complex but unable to self-regulate effectively to achieve positive affect and is prone to depression and stress. Such leaders are presumably rare in political leadership because they struggle to provide the clarity of message required to be elected.

Figure 6.1: Pathological leadership behaviours arising from over or under-differentiation relative to integration of cognitive-emotional experience (adapted from Labouvie-Vief 2005)

At the other end of the scale, leaders may fail to differentiate enough, prematurely foreclosing on complexity. We see this in examples of leaders who exhibit excessive certainty and confidence in their ability to control and predict the unfolding of events. Here the leader essentially ignores or denies complexity in order to protect threats to self and resorts to trusted and over-learned patterns of habitual response and categorisation. This sort of leader is able to maintain a high degree of positive affect (at least until change becomes undeniable) because uncertainty and complexity is either not considered or discounted as unimportant.

Judith Brett's (2007) fascinating analysis of the last year of John Howard's term as prime minister paints a picture of under-differentiated acts of leadership³. Brett (2007) drew upon Little's (1988) characterisation of 'Strong Leadership' to emphasise the way Howard reduced complexity by dichotomising issues:

Howard thrived on division. After all, it is only with division that you can have a contest, show your strength and win. Whatever the issue, Howard turned it into a contest of opposites, in which there were only two possible positions, black and white, right and wrong, with him or against him. Under Howard's leadership, conversations about our national past, our present and our future were re-configured as 'The History

Wars’ and ‘The Culture Wars’, all nuance and complexity reduced to a simplistic confrontation of claim, denial and counter-claim. Bipartisanship was rarely in his repertoire (Brett 2007: 11-12).

The simplistic approach of dichotomising may increase electability and speed up reaction times to urgent simple issues, but it has serious drawbacks in response to complex issues involving multiple stakeholders, long time frames and uncertainty. Again Brett (2007) illustrates these difficulties with respect to the way the Howard government responded to issues of climate change:

The issue of global warming calls, above all, for co-operation, an open inquiring mind and new ideas. It does not lend itself to Strong Leadership's politics of conviction and control. As Graham Little put it, the Strong Leader prefers convictions to new ideas: ‘A Strong Leader's philosophy must be simple and reliable ... Made to strike hard and stick. The intention is not to contribute to debate: the intention is to overcome and then marginalise contrary views out of existence.’

The Strong Leader also wants to solve problems, but the more urgent demands of keeping control of the agenda, scoring points for one's own side and maintaining dominance keep getting in the way. Good policy making thus becomes hostage to the leader's reputation. The Howard government's record on climate change is a casebook study of the policy weaknesses of Strong Leadership: its propensity to construct policy problems in terms of friends and enemies, its lack of interest in new ideas, its imperative to control, and its vulnerability to seduction by special interests (Brett 2007: 56-7).

Brett (2007) discusses similar patterns in response to the release of a report into child abuse among indigenous communities:

The Northern Territory intervention carried all the hallmarks of a Strong Leader's preferred way of operating. An emergency or a crisis requiring immediate and drastic intervention is declared. There is no time for doubt in the face of complexity, nor for talking, listening, consulting. What's needed is swift and decisive action, now! And the leader is convinced that they and only they can see what needs to be done. In response to critics, Howard declared, ‘I don't care. I don't care what they say. They are wrong. I know what I am doing is right’ (Brett 2007: 52).

Such under-differentiated leadership limits options because to change one's position in response to new information, or learn from others through consultation is cast in terms of weakness. To quote Peter Costello mocking Kevin Rudd, ‘A leader doesn't go to committees, a leader knows what he wants and announces it!’ (cited in Brett 2007: 56).

In summary, effective leadership must navigate between these two extremes: sufficient differentiation to be open to new information while recognising and understanding complexity, but sufficient integration with identity, experience and context to bound issues, maintain positive emotion and act effectively.

Having briefly painted a picture of what mental complexity might look like in leadership, and having identified two leadership pathologies that might arise, we are now in a position to return to the question of how this complexity might be developed in public-sector leaders.

The development of cognitive-affective complexity: the core capability of mindfulness

Earlier it was argued that an effective leader has the capacity to step back from experience, to see their experience in context, allowing them to make choices as opposed to operating on automatic pilot. Linsky and Heifetz (2002) refer to this capacity as 'getting up on the balcony', noting that it is also essential to be able to get down on the dance floor when appropriate. Indeed, mental complexity in leadership appears to involve being simultaneously on the dance floor *and* on the balcony, integrating action and reflection dynamically. In psychological terms, this ability has been referred to as 'mindfulness'. Mindfulness has been variously defined but two informative and complementary definitions are: '[p]aying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally' (Kabat-Zinn 2005) and '[t]he continuous creation of new categories; openness to new information; and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective' (Langer 1997: 4).

Mindfulness, applied to leadership, implies a quality of openness to experience where the leader does not closely identify with their thoughts, feelings and sensations but, instead, fosters and maintains a moment-to-moment meta-awareness of the very process of their thinking and feeling. In other words, we are mindful when we are able to deliberately pay attention to what is actually happening without being swept up in patterns of judgment, evaluation, categorisation and reaction arising from past experience. Focusing on what '*is*' rather than our inferences allows us to discover new facets of our experience and act more creatively instead of being constrained by old habits of thinking. For example, most of the time, most of us are entirely unaware of the layers of judgment and evaluation we add to situations, thereby decreasing the possibility of perceiving from a different viewpoint or acting in a new way. The complex demands of public-sector leadership increasingly call for the capacity to creatively and consciously move between pure observation and judgment.

Mindfulness training is one pathway for cultivating a non-reactive self that is able to intelligently register multiple perspectives in ourselves and others. Mindfulness training allows participants to develop a broader perspective on

themselves and their experience, often leading to both differentiation (of otherwise automatic thoughts and feelings) and integration (into patterns of thoughts and feelings, and their relationship to self). Of course, cultivating mindfulness is not the only aspect of enhancing mental complexity. Education, formal analytic techniques and techniques that foster creativity, or dialogue with diverse stakeholders can also be helpful. However, I believe mindfulness may be a *sine qua non* for the development of the highest levels of mental complexity. For example, even though consultation with others can foster mental complexity, it can only do so if the leader is willing and able to attend to multiple perspectives simultaneously instead of acting out of automatic judgment and evaluation.

So, cultivating mindfulness is cultivating cognitive and affective complexity by adopting a perspective that is somewhat outside the whole system of the self interacting with the world. Cultivating mindfulness allows us to self-regulate more effectively and, from a mindful vantage point, leaders are better able to respond rather than react, and to learn from, rather than avoid challenge.

How might mindfulness be developed? Cultivating mindfulness involves disrupting unconscious habits of automatic behaviour ‘over-learned’ across a lifetime. This disruption involves practice and so the standard intensive format for leadership development programs does not lend itself to mindfulness development. However, there is evidence that mindfulness can be enhanced in a relatively short time. The ‘Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction’ (MBSR) program yields demonstrable changes in brain structure and function (Davidson *et al.* 2003), as well as psychological changes associated with increased psychological flexibility and resilience in eight weeks – a time frame that is considerably shorter than the period within which leadership development coaching usually occurs. To date, such programs have been seen as interventions to improve psychological or physical health. However, my experience of teaching MBSR courses is that they can also improve performance at work through helping participants dis-identify with their thoughts and feelings, providing them with more options for response rather than reaction at work. Mindfulness is a mental ability that can be developed in any context and is not restricted to formal or meditative practices (for example, Hayes, Strosahl and Wilson 1999). Mindfulness based therapies are becoming increasingly popular for the treatment of depression, anxiety and a wide range of other psychological difficulties. These therapies tend to rely upon briefer exercises more akin to the sort of experience one might have in an intensive leadership development course. Together with colleagues from Sydney University, I am presently researching whether such brief interventions make any substantial difference to mindfulness and leadership capability.

In conclusion: awareness (perhaps) begets change

In this chapter I have presented a psychological perspective on wisdom in leadership by characterising it as mental complexity. In closing, I wish to broaden the focus from individual capability development to the systemic pressures operating against the development of mental complexity in leaders. First, in the context of public-sector leadership, mindfulness training might suffer by its association with somewhat esoteric or religious traditions. But mindfulness training can be entirely secular and is supported by an increasing body of scientific research showing improvements in psychological flexibility and performance. Second, the media, the oppositional political system and indeed public attitudes often work against the development of, or at least the expression of, mental complexity. For example, we need only to think back to the proposed 'Knowledge Nation' policy and the way in which Barry Jones' 'spaghetti and meatballs diagram' was received by the media and his opponents to see how expressions of uncertainty and complexity can come to be mindlessly evaluated, for example, by association with leader weakness.⁴ It is my hope that, by relating mental complexity and leadership, and by highlighting the way in which leaders must integrate reflection and action — both 'getting up on the balcony' and 'being on the dance floor', that a more nuanced view of expressions of uncertainty and doubt might prevail.

It seems none of us are capable of designing systems of political interaction that capture the benefits of independent thinking and the generative power of a competition of ideas without degenerating into a simple competition of personalities that fosters premature foreclosure into simplistic and judgmental positions. If we are to have the sorts of dialogues and leaders we need, we must be able to tolerate enough uncertainty to allow more sophisticated integrations to emerge than what we already know. By definition, creativity involves a time when we don't know what to do and as leaders we must develop ways in which we can express this complexity and uncertainty in the very midst of acting.

References:

- Brett, J., 2007, 'Exit Right: The unravelling of John Howard', *Quarterly Essay*, 28.
- Carver, C. S. and M. F. Scheier, 1998, *On the Self-Regulation of Behavior*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Davidson, R. J., J. Kabat-Zinn, J. Schumacher, M. Rosenkranz, D. Muller and S. F. Santorelli *et al.*, 2003, 'Alterations in Brain and Immune Function Produced by Mindfulness Meditation', *Psychosom Med*, 65:4, pp. 564-70.
- Fischer, K. W., Z. Yan, and J. B. Stewart, 2002, 'Adult cognitive development: Dynamics in the development web', in J. Valsiner and K. Connolly (eds),

- Handbook of Developmental Psychology*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. pp. 491-516.
- Linsky, M. and R. A. Heifetz, 2002, *Leadership on the Line*, Harvard Business School.
- Kabat-Zinn, J., 2005, *Coming to our Senses*, Hyperion.
- Kegan, R., 1994, *In over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kets de Vries, M. F. R., 2005, 'The Dangers of Feeling Like a Fake,' *Harvard Business Review*, 83:9, pp. 108-16.
- Labouvie-Vief, G., and M. Marquez-Gonzalez, 2004, 'Dynamic integration: Affect optimization and differentiation in development', in D. Y. Dai and R. J. Sternberg (eds), *Motivation, Emotion, and Cognition: Integrative Perspectives on Intellectual Functioning and Development*, Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, pp. 237-72.
- Labouvie-Vief, G. 2005, 'Self-with-other representations and the organization of the self', *Journal of Research in Personality*, 39:1, pp. 185-205.
- Langer, E. J., 2005, *On Becoming an Artist: Reinventing Yourself Through Mindful Creativity*, Ballantine Books.
- McAdams, D., 1997, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*, Guilford Press.
- Torbert, W., S. R. Cook-Greuter, et al., 2004, *Action Inquiry: The Secret of Timely and Transforming Leadership*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

ENDNOTES

¹ Through this chapter I refer to more or less complex mental processes. The word 'mental' here refers to both cognitive and emotional (affective) processes. Contemporary neuroscience and psychology shows cognitions and emotions are inseparable: Our emotional experience is deeply informed by our conscious and unconscious cognitive interpretations of experience and, conversely, all mental events are infused with affective value.

² Even intrapersonally, conflicting emotions might arise at different times or at different levels of self-insight. For example, acting out of anger can be both disturbing and satisfying at the same time and each has different impacts upon action.

³ With respect to John Howard, because I can only assess his mental complexity through the lens of the media, I must constrain any claims to qualities of acts of leadership rather than the qualities of Howard himself. It is of course possible that mentally complex leaders may choose simplistic rhetoric and action in order to persuade a disinterested or under-informed public or just to ensure they are given a 'sound-bite'. But for the climate change issue at least there is increasing objective evidence, irrespective of rhetorical demands, that Howard's rhetoric and policy was insufficiently differentiated and integrated at both the national and global levels.

⁴ 'Knowledge Nation' was the ALP's education policy launched just before the 2001 federal election. See Barry Jones' explanation of the spaghetti diagram: 'How the Knowledge Nation diagram evolved' (July 6, 2001), *Sydney Morning Herald*, accessed 16 September 2008 at <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/11/24/1069522520574.html>