



Leaders navigate but not in straight lines

Leadership as everyday unexceptional practice

Compiled by Ann Moore

When time, ideas or energy are short we tend to have well-practiced go-to recipes to help us achieve something quickly.

Managers and leaders are no exception when they draw on their known leadership practices when confronted with challenges.

Professor Barbara Simpson of Leadership and Organisational Dynamics at Strathclyde University Business School in Glasgow focuses on pragmatic principles of action, flow, and movement in creativity, innovation, leadership and change.

I asked Barbara to explain what does leadership practice actually mean? Particularly for people who are already coping with everyday priorities and constant changes in leading projects, teams and organisations.

What does leadership practice actually mean?

Barbara explained, "There are two completely different ways of thinking about practice. First there is the idea of the routines, the standard practices, patterns and habits we bring to day-to-day work—you might call them recipes, or prescriptions that tell us how we should behave in certain situations."

Many of the ways we think about leadership in organisations tend to focus on a repertoire of standard practices recognised as appropriate ways to act in certain circumstances.

The second and important aspect is that practise is an action, "The ongoing flow of practice that arises in our everyday interactions with each other. It's not static and it's not exceptional."

And yet, as Barbara pointed out, "We often think about leadership as the exceptional actions of exceptional individuals in exceptional circumstances."

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"Taking a flow perspective brings attention to the everyday activities constantly evolving and they're absolutely not exceptional," says Barbara. "When there's twists and turns, when we collectively choose to go in a different direction, that's where leadership happens."

In our workplaces leadership may happen from habitual ways of thinking drawn from existing skill sets. These standard practices, rather than generating agility and action, may cause blockages.

I commented to Barbara that before beginning our NZLI leadership development programmes, managers often talk about feeling blocked, stuck, frustrated, not knowing which way to turn, or who's doing the turning.

"Exactly," she replied. "Stuckness comes from having a set repertoire of practices; I could do this, or that, but hang on, are either of those going to be appropriate? What am I going to do? There's a sense of uncertainty, or panic that arises because prescriptions, the skills and tools you already have acquired; they won't do the job."



“One of the problems with focusing on developing the practices first, or only, is that often people become a bit addicted to them. As soon as you start thinking about your practices as a series of recipes, you’re actually limiting your ability to think differently because you’re less willing to challenge the boundaries of those structures.” They’re not sufficient and often ineffective.

Practising leadership differently

Like many worthwhile endeavours, learning and developing new leadership mindsets and practices takes time and practise.

It also requires being open to challenge current perceptions, refresh perspectives and redirect energies to help strengthen leadership performance for individual, teams, organisations and across sectors.

Developing different leadership practices at all levels in organisations requires newer development approaches.

At NZLI our experience in leadership development shows it’s necessary to push pause, rethink and learn new ways to collaborate across teams and networks that stretches and improves the real work of leadership.

We see real lifts in leadership from managers and leaders in our programmes who are willing to go beyond the boundaries of what they already know—and consciously practise leadership differently in addressing challenges and opportunities—to achieve meaningful and sustained change together.