

# The construction of cultural leadership

Jonathan Price  
On The Edge Research, UK  
j.price1@rgu.ac.uk

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## ABSTRACT

Cultural leadership became a key concept in cultural policy and training in the UK during the early 2000s. It attracted significant public and private investment and remains a major focus for development programmes, now internationally, despite significant changes in sectoral needs and context. This paper reviews the evolution of cultural leadership as a discursive construct, drawing on a decade's research. It pays attention to key inclusions and exclusions, employing Arendt's theory of action to critique fundamental assumptions. A tendency to privilege organisational leadership is challenged by considering the social and aesthetic dimensions of cultural practice alongside corresponding influences from other spheres of action which complicate the notion of autonomy in cultural production. To define cultural leadership is therefore to engage with culture's place in civil society. Distinctions between *entrepreneurial*, *generous* and *public* dimensions of cultural leadership are identified in the analysis with implications for practitioners, training providers and policy makers.

## Keywords:

Cultural leadership  
Artist  
Policy  
Training  
Discourse

## Introduction

The paper reflects critically on the development of cultural leadership as an area of expertise at the crossroads of culture, education and management over the last 15 years. It draws on work undertaken over the past decade by On The Edge Research in association with Gray's School of Art (Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen) which investigates the history and discourse of cultural leadership. A brief history of cultural leadership shows how the concept emerged from specific concerns about cultural sector governance in the UK, leading to the establishment of the Clore Leadership Programme in 2004, before becoming the subject of widespread initiatives nationally and internationally. The character of cultural leadership has been explored through analysis of policy and training discourse alongside material from individual interviews and group debates conducted with selected professionals from different fields in the cultural landscape, including artists and public sector leaders. This narrative considers the ways in which the concept of cultural leadership has related to political and economic changes in recent years and raises questions about the position of artists in relation to organisational development in the cultural sector.

The construction of leadership as a concept in itself is critiqued through an application of the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt which highlights a number of features particularly relevant to cultural contexts. This analysis suggests that a tendency to focus on leaders as decision makers and problem solvers conceals the uncertainties of human action and sits in tension with the social operation of culture. This difficulty resonates with the experiences of many of the contributors to the research. The paper goes on to argue that the perspective of the artist provides a lens through which alternative and richer understandings of cultural leadership can be identified, widening the focus beyond questions of financial and organisational management. Finally, several essential points of focus for cultural leadership are differentiated, allowing distinction between *entrepreneurial*, *generous* and *public* characterisations of action. These understandings are important for the coherent development of the many cultural leadership courses and training programmes now in operation worldwide. They are also relevant to artists and other cultural sector actors reflecting on their relationship to cultural structures and the wider public realm.

**“CULTURAL LEADERSHIP EMERGED AS PART OF THE TERMINOLOGY OF CULTURAL POLICY IN THE UK SHORTLY AFTER THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM. AT THAT TIME THERE WAS A STRONG SENSE OF MANAGERIAL CRISIS AT A NATIONAL LEVEL IN THE CULTURAL SECTOR”**

The research underpinning this paper consists of three connected parts taking place over a period of more than 10 years. The Artist as Leader project (2006-2009), which included a series of investigative labs, interviews and a research report (Douglas & Fremantle, 2009), was perhaps the first systematic critique of cultural leadership discourse. Working from a UK perspective, it questioned the absence of artists from the prevailing business-based leadership framework, suggesting that the orientation towards organisations left out key parts of how leadership works in relation to cultural practice, particularly the role of artists as leaders through their creative practice and in the public realm. Following on from this, my doctoral research (2012-2016) employed further interviews to revisit these issues in the wake of the financial crisis,

also questioning how forces external to the cultural sector play formative roles in its development both in the UK and internationally (Price, 2016). Finally, the project Cultural leadership and the place of the artist (2015-2016) consisted of a partnership between On The Edge Research, The Clore Leadership Programme, Creative Scotland and ENCATC, producing a series of seminars in Edinburgh, Brussels and London to generate engagement with cultural sector professionals around the concepts developed through the research, while attempting to link hitherto disconnected debates in the UK and Europe.

These events took place in the context of accelerating political change which further reframed the question of leadership for cultural actors and policy makers internationally.

## A brief history of cultural leadership

Cultural leadership emerged as part of the terminology of cultural policy in the UK shortly after the turn of the millennium. At that time there was a strong sense of managerial crisis at a national level in the cultural sector. From about 1997, a string of major organisations had encountered serious organisational and governance difficulties in quick succession. These included nationally significant institutions such as the Royal Opera House, English National Opera, the British Museum and the Royal Shakespeare Company, leading to the perception of a pervasive problem that needed to be addressed by concrete action (Hewison, 2004). Why was the country, or at least the sector, somehow

failing to develop and retain individuals with sufficient business and relational skills to meet the evolving needs of these iconic cultural organisations? The issue caught the particular attention of philanthropist Dame Vivien Duffield, then a member of the board of the Royal Opera House, and it was through her Clore Duffield Foundation that a report was commissioned from writers John Holden and Robert Hewison, which ultimately recommended the setting up of the Clore Leadership Programme (Hewison & Holden, 2002). This report, which reflected on evidence from a range of existing management reviews in subsectors such as theatre, the performing arts and museums, used the term "cultural leadership" to characterise the common thread of concern now seen as relevant across the broader cultural sector. Established in this way, cultural leadership is an umbrella term and therefore brings together a range of practices and settings with a corresponding diversity of purposes and business models. At the outset, however, it was clear that what it indicated were top executive roles within high profile, large-scale, publicly funded institutions – or, as Pablo Rossello from the British Council has put it, "a highly entrepreneurial senior manager (...) a very institutional version of the cultural leader. Someone who could drive the Southbank Centre" (Rossello, 2014: 5-6). This kind of context, together with the unifying issue of managerial competence, set the tone for subsequent discourse around cultural leadership in policy and training.

It was against this backdrop that serious investment was poured into cultural leadership in the UK during the next few years, producing ripples in a pond which has never been still since. In addition to the Foundation-backed Clore Leadership Programme, a government-funded Cultural Leadership Programme was established in 2006 with endorsement and direct funding from the then-Chancellor and soon-to-be Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. Cultural leadership became entwined with the agenda of "creativity" as a key ingredient of entrepreneurial culture and economic success: following the recommendations of the recently published Cox review (2005), it seemed that the learning relationship between culture and mainstream business was no longer a one way street. This perception was by no means limited to the UK. In the heady period prior to the global financial crisis the *Harvard Business Review* would declare that "the MFA is the new MBA" (quoted in Adler, 2006: 486); as the Chair of the USA's National Endowment for the Arts could comfortably observe, the new economic virtues of "imagination, innovation and creativity" were very much the "skills that artists develop, nurture and promote" (National Endowment for the Arts, 2008: iv). The Clore programme continued to thrive, expanding its UK provision with new short courses alongside the main fellowship activities, while also starting to wield international influence through an advisory role on the University of Hong Kong's Advanced Cultural Leadership programme from 2009. The British Coun-

cil also got in on the act, launching Cultural Leadership International in 2008 with a particular emphasis on developing relationships in the Middle East and North Africa (Rossello, 2014). Dedicated writing on the topic slowly began to emerge, produced both within and in response to the official training programmes (Leicester, 2007; Douglas & Fremantle, 2007 & 2009; Kay & Venner 2010).

By this point, however, the economic crisis was beginning to bite and its political consequences soon followed. The Conservative-led coalition government that took power in the UK in May 2010 introduced new programmes of austerity and immediate cuts to cultural budgets. The expensive Cultural Leadership Programme was an early casualty, winding up in March 2011, while the developmental needs of arts and cultural organisations became subsumed in an urgent focus on dwindling resources. A smaller publicly funded programme, Developing Resilient Leadership, was announced by Arts Council England in 2012, its very title reflecting the more embattled times (Arts Council England, 2012). The delivery contract went to Clore. Resilience was becoming a keyword, appearing with increasing frequency as a theme in conferences and initiatives elsewhere in the UK and Europe (Cultura 21, 2012; Creative Scotland, 2017; Wilkinson, 2014). Nonetheless, interest in the topic of cultural leadership showed little sign of abating. Research in the UK showed around 60 management and leadership courses with specific relevance to the cultural sector in operation annually by 2013 (TBR, 2013). Internationally, the language of cultural leadership appeared in new programmes in South Africa (2012) and the Netherlands (2013) as well as in the discussion about a proposed pan-European programme under the name of The Fika Project from 2014; this initiative has produced two books on cultural leadership (Dalborg & Löfgren, 2016a & 2016b) while one of its core partners, Nätverkstan Kultur, already runs a regular two-year professional leadership course in Gothenburg (*Kulturverkstan*). The Fika books were launched in June 2016 in Brussels to coincide with the ENCATC Annual Policy Debate held by the European network of cultural management and policy, an event focused for that year specifically on cultural leadership. A short Global Cultural Leadership programme was piloted in October 2016 by an EU-convened consortium, The Cultural Diplomacy Platform, to coincide with the IFACCA World Summit in Malta, also themed on cultural leadership for its 2016 edition; the programme continued in Athens in 2017. King's College, London piloted a new, intensive course aimed at high level international cultural managers, *Leading Culture in the 21st Century*, in April 2017 (King's College, London 2017). Further north, Leicester's Curve Theatre responded to the demographics of its home city by launching the Curve Cultural Leadership Programme (CCLPP) for black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) professional leaders as a two-year course from October 2016 (Stafford, 2017).

These new UK initiatives suggest a movement towards more specialised provision for specific needs and target markets but retain a family relationship to Clore: *Leading Culture's* course director, the former Cultural Leadership Programme director Hilary Carty, was appointed as the new Chief Executive of Clore in September 2017, replacing Sue Hoyle (Clore Leadership Programme, 2017), while CCCLP was established by a former Clore Fellow, Curve Chief Executive Chris Stafford. In the related literature, interest in new models of cultural sector management and innovation has produced a substantial survey of approaches to cultural leadership in Asia (Caust, 2015) and a survey of related courses and theory under the guise of "cultural entrepreneurship" internationally (Kuhlke, Schramme & Kooyman, 2015). It is now possible to learn cultural leadership from a handbook written by the original Clore report authors (Hewison & Holden, 2012) or to peruse international case studies (Caust, 2013).

Amid this proliferation it is worth remembering that the topic has a prehistory. Once upon a time the arts sector, at least, was satisfied with the term "arts administration", which was good enough for John Pick (1980) to use as the title of an early handbook and to designate Arts Council of Great Britain Secretary-General Roy Shaw's visiting professorship at City University in the mid-1970s (Moody, 2002). ENCATC, which now describes itself as the European network on cultural management and policy, derives its acronym from its original 1992 title "European Network of Cultural Administration Training Centres" (ENCATC, 2017). The term "arts management" began to gain currency around the end of that decade, a little ahead of the concern with leadership (Evard & Colbert, 2000). The path from "administration" through "management" to "leadership" could be seen as some kind of linguistic arms race in terms of adding significance and credibility to the business of running cultural organisations. This progression has encountered at least one dissenting voice, with Christopher Gordon and Peter Stark describing large scale investment in cultural leadership as "hubris" in a 2010 government report, seeing it as feeding and reflecting a surfeit of "middle management" posts in the sector (Gordon & Stark, 2010: 3.b.ii.5). Scrapping of the government-funded Cultural Leadership Programme followed shortly afterwards. This was a clear sign of a change of era which also suggested that cultural leadership training had by that point shifted its focus away from top executive positions. Few would argue that good management and efficient administration are valuable to the cultural sector and well worth some investment in training, but it is legitimate to question whether all activities which have at various points come under the umbrella of cultural leadership fully justify the billing. A starting point for *On The Edge's* research was a sense that something was missing from the narrative.

This short history traces cultural leadership as a term, rather than as a practice. It sketches a trajec-

tory of the concept's development in the UK and internationally but does little to account for several key areas of action and influence which shape cultural life. To begin with, many of the possible leadership roles played by artists are not represented within a business-focused definition of cultural leadership which tends to foreground the structural needs of organisations and institutions ahead of the aesthetic and social concerns which may be driving cultural practice. This was the objection raised in the *Artist as Leader* research project. By questioning the implied inclusions and exclusions of cultural leadership, the final report consciously problematized the assumptions of cultural leadership: "The focus on the leadership of artists opens up a complexity around leadership and takes the discourse beyond organisations, skills and competencies" (Douglas & Fremantle, 2009: 5).

Critical writing on cultural leadership was in short supply at the outset of this research. At the time of the *Artist as Leader* work, published work that used the terminology was almost exclusively linked to the Clore programme, whether forming part of its setting up process (Hewison & Holden, 2002) or reflecting subsequently upon it (Hewison, 2004). These documents themselves quote a handful of more specific subsectoral reports to illustrate the combination of skills, management and recruitment issues which combine to form the cultural leadership crisis (see, for example, re:source, 2001). As the decade wore on, two trajectories of interest opened up: reflections within the cultural sector on the scope and meaning of its new topic, represented principally in the *Cultural Leadership Reader* (Kay & Venner, 2010), and interest from the business community in the potential leadership lessons now emanating from the creative sector (Adler, 2006). In the UK, this took official form in a report for the Treasury by Sir George Cox which attempted to pin down the secret formula of creativity as an ingredient for economic success (Cox, 2005). For the most part, these strands of literature mapped out the possible features of cultural leadership and considered either what was necessary for cultural professionals to become leaders or what could be learned from culture for the study of leadership. At this stage there was little critical engagement with the concept of leadership itself. One welcome exception to this appeared with Graham Leicester's paper for *Missions Models Money*, "Rising to the occasion", which reconsidered the role of arts and cultural leadership in an age of anxiety, uncertainty and complexity (Leicester, 2007). This recognised the burn-out potential of heaping ever more "miraculous" expectations on idealised leaders in all fields, pointing to a need to evolve organisational culture as much as the leader (Leicester, 2007: 6). It also identified the societal resource represented by the arts and cultural sector for retrieving meaning in a time of crisis and embodying the new relationships and structures demanded by change. Leicester's diagnosis goes beyond the needs of the

cultural sector while avoiding reduction to the demands of business. After a decade's intensification of the cultural crisis he describes, it bears revisiting<sup>1</sup>.

Another alternative coinage of cultural leadership appears in a book derived from a 1995 symposium in Boston, *Cultural leadership in America* (Corn, 1998). This work refers to the role of private collectors, particularly women, in establishing late 19th and early 20th century galleries and museums in the United States and in the process acting as public tastemakers. Its subjects are wealthy amateur benefactors whose patronage (or "matronage") was essential in sustaining artistic careers at that time. The distinction of this definition from what has usually been connoted by cultural leadership in the UK and elsewhere since 2002 is worth considering for a moment: it highlights the specialisation acquired by the term, and its narrowness. Benefactors or tastemakers may be non-specialist or at least non-professional – nothing to do with arts management – but are nonetheless important shapers of the circumstances in which art is produced and cultural development occurs. Rather than being an internal issue for a cultural sector, such a conception of cultural leadership is outward facing, concerned with the public as much as with the artist or with the mechanics of running a building or organisation. It also refers to those whose access to wealth and the power to intervene according to their own tastes and values (and therefore in their own interests) gives them a privileged position in relation to the establishment of aesthetic norms and the cultural economy. In this context the scope of the term includes all of these things and the relationships between them. Despite its own highly specialised frame of reference, *Cultural Leadership in America* represents a useful alternative perspective on the concept, a counterpoint to the growing interest in arts management as a distinct profession that was also developing on the same side of the Atlantic around this time (Evard & Colbert, 2000; Lapierre, 2001).

## Action and leadership: a theoretical critique

For a better understanding of the overall concept of leadership this research makes use of Hannah Arendt's theory of action as articulated in her 1958 work *The Human Condition*. Arendt sees action as a fundamental category of behaviour (alongside speech) through which we make ourselves distinct as human beings and begin to live a human life among other people (Arendt, 1998: 176). Arendt grounds her theory by tracing the development of words designating "to act" in Greek and Latin. She observes that each language originally employed two words for this, with

one (*archein* in Greek and *agere* in Latin) indicating the element of initiating or setting in motion, and the other (respectively *prattein* and *gerere*) meaning to achieve or complete. The relationship between the two suggested the interdependence of the elements of action as a principle of human affairs: whoever begins an action depends on others for its realisation and completion. Over time, however, the latter term became the word for action in general, whereas the "initiating" term acquired a political specialisation: to lead, or to rule. The interdependence of action split into separate functions: "the function of giving commands, which became the prerogative of the ruler, and the function of executing them, which became the duty of his subjects" (Arendt, 1998: 189).

Arendt shows how this development ruptures the original integration of action and works to isolate the ruler or leader from others. In terms of the concept's development in politics she goes on to identify Plato as the source for the archetype of the "strong man", the leader who is not dependent on others (Arendt, 1998: 222-223). Seeing dependency as a form of weakness, Plato proposes an ideal leader whose power derives from the fact that he is alone. Only this solitary strong man can be fully invested with authority – not only in the sense of being able to command, but also in the sense of being the sole author of action, beginning a story of which he will also determine the ending. For Arendt this figure is a "fallacy" (Arendt, 1998: 190). Such a fetishisation of leadership ruptures the integrated process of action, denying the dynamic contribution of its necessary net of relationships. This isolation of authority also creates a significant ethical problem, as the field of action becomes divided between those who give orders and those who follow them. Arendt, as a German-Jewish philosopher notable for her concern with the origins of totalitarianism, is particularly alert to the implications of this construction. Indeed, the present political moment of resurgent populism and bombastic national figureheads is an apt time for revisiting Arendt's political philosophy. Crude as the Platonic strong man figure may appear, it casts a significant shadow into our own era and across modern leadership theory. It appears not only in the simplistic techniques of the "transactional" leader, who ensures compliance through punishment and reward, but also in the variety of "heroic" leadership models which position the leader as inspirational or visionary (Bass, 1990). Such "transformational" figures have long been celebrated in corporate business culture, often looked to as potential miracle workers who can sort out problems almost through the force of their personality (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011: 14-15). It is a form of emphasis which foregrounds the individual, reducing all issues of leadership to the symbolic leader who becomes the source of all solutions and, in case of failure, the site of any problem. A result of

1 Leicester himself returned to these ideas in a piece for the *Cultural Leadership Reader* (Kay & Venner, 2010: 16-23) before expanding them in the 2012 book *Dancing at the Edge: Competence, Culture and Organization* in the 21st century, co-authored with Maureen O'Hara.

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this, and a danger, is that systemic issues can become suppressed or ignored (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011: 168). In circumstances where it is not possible to address root causes or to effect cultural change, it can therefore be particularly tempting to make extravagant demands of the much more visible individual leader. For cultural organisations the frequent pressure to deliver short-term results in trying circumstances can make the pursuit of charisma particularly attractive – the sector constituting, as Robert Hewison puts it, “a system where only heroic leadership appears capable of overcoming all the obstacles and difficulties that are inherent in the system” (Hewison, 2004: 163). This can lead to flawed recruitment processes and excessive tolerance of the foibles of those who seem, outwardly, to represent the desired silver bullet solution; in this respect, pervasive cultural sector stereotypes such as the “diva” or troubled genius contribute unhelpfully, even to the point of fostering bullying (Quigg, 2011).

Arendt’s theory serves as a reminder that leadership is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Ultimately it is action that matters – for example the production of art itself, rather than the structures of a sector which should exist to support it. One theme arising from the research interviews, particularly in relation to the financial crisis, was the need for lighter touch organisational frameworks to support projects and, sometimes, for organisations to be allowed to die when they have served their purpose (Fremantle, 2013: 5; Glass, 2013: 9-10). Cultural leadership should ask questions of the purposes we want to pursue, and therefore of what structures are necessary for the future, rather than being limited to questions of how we manage and maintain the organisations we already have.

Arendt’s theory also identifies three distinctive features of action: unpredictability, plurality and boundlessness. Action is unpredictable because it exists in an endless chain of action and reaction. An action is the beginning of a story that will be continued through the responses of others, the further consequences of which cannot themselves be foreseen. Action is plural because of this necessary relationship to others. Many people are involved in the realisation of an action or the response to it, forming the basis (in Arendt’s terms) for political life. It is through the in-

volvement of others that any human action derives its meaning. Finally, action is boundless because responses and interactions cannot be limited to any one sphere of human affairs. The knock-on effects can make themselves felt well beyond the original actor’s field of operation (the appropriation of technological advances for unforeseen uses is illustrative of this kind of process). These elements of action relate strongly to two essential dimensions of cultural leadership which are frequently emphasised in research interviews and group discussions: its orientation to the future, and its relationship to people. In fact any kind of leadership must be defined in terms of these two aspects. Exactly who is included and prioritised in action, and how the unknowns and uncertainties of the future are encountered, are key to understanding the character and effectiveness of cultural leadership as it is practiced and experienced. It can correspondingly be observed that the limitations of leadership are revealed by patterns of exclusion. Such limits are defined in the negative by the needs, interests and contexts which go unrecognised or are unvalued in the processes through which intended action (or policy) is decided.

## **The experience of cultural leadership**

Throughout the research programme conversations and exchanges with artists, cultural managers and policy makers have been central to the development of thinking. This process continued into a third phase with the project Cultural leadership and the place of the artist (2015-2016), funded by the UK’s Arts & Humanities Research Council. This added a series of group seminars and discussions to the earlier programme of interviews<sup>2</sup>. Participants at these events included previous research interviewees, some of them contributors from the original Artist as Leader programme, producing mature reflections from long-standing engagement with the themes. Participants were invited to relate the constructions of policy and theory to their own experiences and interpretations of cultural leadership.

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see <https://ontheedgeresearch.org/cultural-leadership-and-the-place-of-the-artist-2015-16/>

One form of understanding which emerged with surprising consistency within the research was the perception that cultural leadership is something that happens internally within the cultural sector. To a large extent, the original discursive construction remains intact, in spite of the fact that it was produced by a particular set of circumstances at a particular time and place. Cultural leadership tends not to be interpreted as a role or process with external significance or influence – shaping cultural life and experience for a community or a nation – even by those professionals who are otherwise powerful advocates for the social significance of artistic expression and cultural participation. The compound term “cultural leadership” has potential to carry a great variety of meaning but instead is used within the sector to point narrowly to organisational management and direction finding. Within this, one interesting distinction can still be identified. On one level cultural leaders can be seen simply as those responsible for the success of their particular cultural organisation or project. This is consistent with the “highly entrepreneurial senior manager” identified by Rossello (2014: 5) as the basis of cultural leadership discourse in the 2000s. An alternative understanding is that cultural leadership involves working for the greater good of the sector as a whole, being prepared to put aside personal or local interests where necessary. This calls for organisations to be “generous” rather than competitive (Ward, 2014: 7) or for individuals to demonstrate a “vocational” form of commitment (Fuller & Tregidden, 2014: 10). This sense that there is a higher principle to serve may be typical of voluntary or not-for-profit organisations more generally; the vocation or higher purpose could be education, health or social work. There is nothing essentially “cultural” about either construction. In essence these internally focused understandings of cultural leadership involve generic conceptions of leadership being mapped onto the cultural sector. What is distinctive about culture is not how the sector’s organisations operate as businesses but the role that the content of their work plays for individuals and society, their processes of making meaning and communicating different forms of value. A third and perhaps fuller understanding of cultural leadership would therefore involve an external focus, an engagement with the forms of social exchange that cultural production entails. A cultural leader thus understood is someone connected with society, prepared to intervene and propose or even impose meaning. Such a cultural leader is an active social agent, not a mere purveyor of goods in a cultural market place. In interviews and other research discussions with cultural professionals, it is consistently individuals showing characteristics of vocational generosity or public engagement who are recognised and respected as leaders within their peer group.

One of the research programme’s events took place in Edinburgh in 2016 with a strong representation of artists amongst the group of contributors<sup>3</sup>. Thinking about the ways in which artists might lead drew us inevitably into discussion about what it is that art does which is distinctive from other fields of human activity. For several in the room at least part of the answer lay in art’s capacity to engage with uncertainty and to articulate contradiction without feeling compelled to resolve or deny conflict. Art is able to hold onto paradox. This was seen as of particular value in a world of “wicked” problems for which clear and simple solutions will never be available. This is part of its contribution to human knowledge<sup>4</sup>. Such an understanding relates closely to an earlier research interview with the producer Roanne Dods in which she characterises her role in terms of the timescale for decision-making:

*The ability of a producer to keep ambivalence open for longer is different than a traditional hero leader or entrepreneur leader (...) traditionally leaders are quick decision makers, you know, sorting out problems, moving things through with a very particular sense of time, and will see their jobs done sooner (Dods, 2014: 4).*

By keeping a decision open for longer, resisting resolution, a wider range of possibilities remain available within the artistic process. The sociologist of art Pascal Gielen adds an important observation to a similar point when he ascribes to the artist the role of “problematizing” issues and contrasts this with the “problem-solving” purpose now routinely allocated to “creativity” in public policy (Gielen, 2013: 38). Two possible conclusions can be drawn from all of this. One is that the ability to hold paradox or to live with conflict could suggest at least a partial answer to the question – often asked – of what is distinctively “cultural” about cultural leadership. An alternative way of looking at it is that creating the space for uncertainty or tension to be expressed is a specific task of cultural leadership – that in resisting pressure to provide neat solutions or conclusions a leader opens up the capacity of a given cultural form or process to realise its deeper value.

This outlook relates strongly to issues of trust in intra-sectoral relationships, something that emerged repeatedly as a crucial ingredient of cultural leadership in the process of research. Both in relevant literature and in the experiences of interviewees, increasingly “managerialist” approaches to implementation of cultural policy, particularly in terms of relationships between funders and the funded, appeared as strongly negative influences on cultural development (Caust, 2003; Belfiore, 2004; Hewison, 2006). The tendency of this approach is to require certainty about what will be achieved and to impose rigorous controls

<sup>3</sup> Part of the Cultural leadership and the place of the artist programme, this event took place in Edinburgh on the 20 May 2016. The present analysis draws on recordings of the sessions which are in possession of the author. A short review of the event is available at: <https://ontheedgeresearch.org/2016/05/28/holding-the-paradox/>

<sup>4</sup> It is perhaps significant that a large proportion of the artists at this event work predominantly with environmental issues.

## “IF PART OF THE ROLE OF CULTURAL LEADERSHIP IS TO CREATE SPACE FOR THE CREATIVE PROCESS, TO KEEP POSSIBILITIES OPEN AND UNRESOLVED, THEN SUCH TENDENCIES IN PUBLIC MANAGEMENT CREATE DISCOMFORTING TENSION”

– in the name of accountability and value for public money – to ensure that contractual promises are kept. Unfortunately this relates very poorly to how cultural activities actually function, as Leeds City Council's cultural director Cluny Macpherson observes: “There’s a sort of confusion about how ideas and creativity [are] at the basis of it, rather than outcomes” (Macpherson, 2014: 6). In a similar vein, Jane Spiers (Aberdeen Performing Arts) relates an experience from a previous workplace of dealing with a new financial manager who had come from outside of the cultural sector. This individual struggled to understand ambitious conversations taking place at board level about projects for developing the venue:

*And this guy sort of said, I don't understand why you're even having this conversation, there's no money in the budget. And I said to him, you know what, there's never any money in the budget – that's what working in the arts is. But we don't stifle creativity because there's no money in the budget... The process is we have conversations about what we want to do... and then we go out and raise the money for them. That's how it works, you know. And we bring in a million pounds a year for these projects (Spiers, 2014: 12).*

This is not about not being business-like – Spiers is elsewhere infuriated by the tendency in cultural discourse to separate or even oppose “business” and “the arts” (Spiers, 2014: 16) – but about doing business in the way that is appropriate to cultural action and creative ideas: “Take it as read: if we don’t have the money for a project, we don’t do it. But the process is, what is it we want to do, fire the imagination, get out there, raise the money, and deliver the project” (Spiers, 2014: 12).

Managerialism denies the unpredictability of action with which culture and many of its professionals are otherwise well suited to engage. If part of the role of cultural leadership is to create space for the creative process, to keep possibilities open and unresolved, then such tendencies in public management create discomfoting tension. It is a false interpretation of financial accountability if the process through which it is pursued damages the purpose for which expenditure was originally allocated. Nonetheless, those in the public and cultural sectors who manage or receive public funding still have a democratic duty

to be accountable. Dealing with this tension productively rather than counter-productively is a key part of their specific leadership challenge.

This form of understanding helps to illustrate management theorist Keith Grint's (2005) observation that leadership is not only about “person” and “position” but also “result” and “process”. Much leadership theory and training, being focused on the individual leader, concentrates on the necessary capacities of the leader (person) to effect change in connection with their role in a hierarchy (position). The impact of leadership is achieved in this sense through purposeful individual action. However, other important processes of leadership can be experienced more subtly as forms of influence, including for example the influence of artistic work on other artists and on society. Rather than working through direct and deliberate action the leader acts as exemplar – perhaps even unconsciously – and the effect of leadership may only be detectable retrospectively in the light of whatever difference has been made (result). Meanwhile, individual agency may not be traceable at all, or simply may not be the most significant factor, in the operation of broader social or organisational dynamics (process). Such processes may not be susceptible to being taught or tamed via regular training courses, but they remain integral to the operation of culture. It may be that some artists, particularly those active in relational or social practices, are well ahead of policy makers and training providers in understanding how to acknowledge such ambiguous influences and accommodate them in their creative work. This does not mean, of course, that the same individuals are necessarily good at the day to day running of organisations. Reconciling these different elements of conceptual potential and practical requirement lies at the heart of the challenge of leadership development for the sector.

### **Conclusion: three dimensions of cultural leadership**

The modern policy agenda of cultural leadership emerged out of a concern for the future of cultural organisations and the ability of the cultural sector to develop and maintain the skills required for their suc-



successful operation. Critique of the discourse of cultural leadership through the programme of research at On The Edge has questioned whether this construction is sufficient to account for how cultural activity is shaped, both in terms of the ways in which artists and other cultural sector actors may lead in different spheres of activity and in terms of how forces of influence from outside the sector act upon it. The forms of cultural leadership development that became established through training programmes from the Clore Leadership Programme onwards emerged as responses to a particular sense of crisis at a certain moment in the UK. This perception of crisis emerged just as the cultural sector's economic and social significance was achieving rare recognition and support within government. Leadership discourse provided a route through which this uncomfortable coincidence could be resolved, and with its aura of "creativity", culture seemed well placed to make a reciprocal contribution. Within a few years, UK training providers were in a position to begin exporting a particular brand of cultural leadership expertise. For this, in the sector both nationally and internationally, appetites remain strong, perhaps stoked in turn by the renewed and more general atmosphere of crisis proceeding from the economic earthquake of a decade ago and the various political tsunamis that have followed. As critical analysts Mats Alvesson and André Spicer have observed, leadership now has a tendency to be proposed as the solution to almost any kind of organisational or societal problem (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011: 1).

The discourse of cultural leadership which has developed over the last decade and a half continues to frame understanding among cultural professionals of what the concept is and can be. Analysis of this discourse reveals its limitations and assumptions, and this paper has considered some of the broader and richer ways of interpreting leadership in culture which can be considered by artists, policy makers and training providers. These raise essential questions about the role of art and culture in public life which, it is suggested, should be actively considered by any artist who wishes to understand or extend their individual autonomy. A challenge is also set for training providers in terms of which levels of leadership they are prepared or equipped to address in their courses. Reflecting on

the 10 years of research at On The Edge, three different focal points can be identified: *entrepreneurial* cultural leadership (centring on the interests and operational success of a project or organisation, at whatever scale of operation); *generous* cultural leadership (prioritising the needs of the cultural form or sector, extending efforts beyond individual or organisational interest); and *public* cultural leadership (relating to wider societal influence and involvement in the public realm)<sup>5</sup>. The first two of these are internally oriented with regard to the cultural sector and the third is outward facing. They are all relevant across different financial or organisational models. Entrepreneurial in this sense means the ability to gather people and resources around an idea and to deliver on strategies for its realisation. It can involve public funding, private enterprise, voluntary commitment or any combination that can be made viable. It is essential for every kind of work; it is often the reason why boards send their executives on training courses and it is what the original understanding of cultural leadership in UK policy and training was established to improve. The cultural sector, however, would be unrecognisable without generous leadership, and it would also be dysfunctional. The form of commitment that this expresses is vocational. It is not unique to cultural professions but it has a recognisable and integral function within them. Public leadership, meanwhile, includes everything from civic and social commitments to the role of the sector in

the wider economy. It includes the values expressed through creative work and the issues at whose service an organisation or individual may choose to put their reputation and practice.

Naturally, these categories overlap and concern for one focus does not exclude operating in relation to another. The entrepreneurial and the generous can be linked by enlightened self-interest (it may be entrepreneurially advantageous to be part of a healthy, thriving sector) while it may be public concerns that cause an entrepreneurially demanding project or organisation to be established in the first place; but the three elements do not dissolve in these areas of fusion. Differentiating between these different centres of focus can be useful for the analysis of a shifting discourse and may help to explain various communica-

**"THE LANGUAGE OF LEADERSHIP CAN HAVE A GREAT VARIETY OF MEANINGS WHEN EMPLOYED ACROSS THESE DIFFERENT REGISTERS. FOR DIFFERENT TIMES AND PLACES, CULTURAL SECTOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT REQUIRES CONTINUAL READJUSTMENT OF ITS FOCUS ACCORDING TO CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES"**

<sup>5</sup> Sue Hoyle, from the Clore Leadership Programme, has written about "generous" leadership as the basis of a more relational style with particular relevance to the cultural sector (Hoyle, 2014a).

tion breakdowns between individuals or organisations whose outlook is dominated by (or excludes) one or other frame of reference. The language of leadership can have a great variety of meanings when employed across these different registers. For different times and places, cultural sector leadership development requires continual readjustment of its focus according to contemporary challenges. Graham Leicester's 2007 analysis argued that in a time of cultural crisis the cultural sector can provide the people, settings and forms of knowledge and perception that can help evolve the culture (Leicester, 2007: 12-13). The first task, then, is to be clear about which crisis we consider ourselves to be addressing. A meaningful approach to cultural leadership development must therefore take into account the public dimension which goes beyond the internal functionality of cultural sector management, where the artist's ability to engage with paradox and unpredictability is understood as an essential component of the concept's value. Further research would be required to see to what extent today's leadership programmes have evolved their focus to include this perspective and to reflect changing needs.

These three dimensions of cultural leadership (entrepreneurial, generous and public) can be related to, but do not precisely match, the three scenarios of artistic leadership identified in the Artist as Leader research – organisational, aesthetic and public realm (Douglas & Fremantle, 2009). One final point worth making is that you do not have to be an artist, or even a professional within the cultural sector, to act or wield influence in any one of these dimensions. Non-cultural organisations – and individuals like the matrons and patrons of *Cultural Leadership in America* – can initiate cultural projects. People whose primary role is external to the cultural sector can act or intervene in relation to its interests, as politicians and lawmakers continually do. Society, meanwhile, shapes cultural production through its appetites, technologies, tolerances and structures just as culture, in turn, shapes social values and identity. Here is culture's plurality, and also its boundlessness. The public realm is a place of exchange. It is perhaps where many of the most important but least understood processes of cultural leadership take place.

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