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Engaging leadership part one: competencies are like Brighton Pier

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Abstract

Part one of this paper draws a distinction between the concepts of the personal qualities and values required of those occupying a leadership role, leadership competencies, and engaging leadership behaviour. On the basis of reviews of the literature and survey, empirical and case study data, it concludes that personal qualities and values, and leadership competencies are necessary, but not sufficient, for effective leadership. Part two goes on to consider the relationship between leader development and leadership development, and to present a 'mental model', which seeks to integrate these three concepts and to relate them to the distinction between leader behaviour and leadership behaviour, as well as the development of human and social capital.

Key words

leadership; competencies; qualities; values; performance; engagement

Introduction

Notions of leadership, which have changed over the decades, mostly affected by changes in society, can be seen to have gone through five main stages. Thus, the trait or great man theories of the 1930s (stage one) gave way to the behavioural theories of the 1950s (stage two), out of which the notion of managerial competency, later leadership competency, arose. Both were criticised for failing to take proper account of situational factors, and saw the emergence of situational and contingency models (stage three). The late 1970s and early 1980s saw the emergence of stage four, which was prompted by recognition that leadership is fundamentally about handling constant change,

creating a vision, and engaging individuals in the means by which they are able to cope with ever-changing situations – dealing effectively with what Charles Handy (1995) referred to as '*never ending white water*'. Thus, the definition of leadership changed from a process that involves influencing others, occurred within a group context, and involved goal attainment (Northouse, 2004), toward emphasising the role of a leader as '*defining organisational reality*' (Bryman, 1996).

This '*new paradigm*' thinking resulted in models of '*distant*', often '*heroic*' leadership, with emphases on '*charisma*', '*vision*', and '*transformation*' (eg. Alimo-Metcalf & Alban-Metcalf, 2002; Northouse, 2004; Wright, 1996). These models have, in turn, come

in for criticism for a number of reasons (Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2005; Collins, 2001; Mintzberg, 1999; see Alimo-Metcalfe *et al*, 2007 for a review), particularly following unedifying events such as the fall of Enron and Worldcom. Indeed, there is a growing awareness of what has come to be described as the ‘dark side of charisma’ (Hogan *et al*, 1990). This relates to flaws in the personal characteristics of those occupying leadership roles, which has again come to the fore (eg. Tourrish & Vatcha, 2005). Hogan has been at the forefront of research into ‘the dark side’, and has extolled organisations to not only focus on identifying the presence of certain positive characteristics, but equally importantly, to ensure the absence of ‘dark side’ traits, particularly those that alienate other colleagues, most importantly subordinates, and the inability to build and support a team (Hogan *et al*, 1994).

Stage five thinking emerged almost simultaneously in the UK and the US. In both cases, this reflected an increasing awareness of the value of engaging with staff – value not just in human terms, but also in terms of profitability, on the basis of extensive survey data. In parallel, research at the University of Leeds led to the development of a model of ‘nearby, post-heroic transformational’ or ‘engaging leadership’, and a 360-degree instrument, the Transformational Leadership Questionnaire (TLQ), the validity of which has been established in different public and private-sector organisations (Alban-Metcalfe & Alimo-Metcalfe, 2000, 2007; Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2001, 2005, 2006; Dobby *et al*, 2004; Kelly *et al*, 2006). The TLQ was based on a sample of 150 managers and professionals in the NHS and local government, which was inclusive with reference to age, gender, ethnicity, and level in the organisation. The initial findings were replicated in a Home Office study among police officers and staff, in which the sample also included individuals with a declared different sexual orientation (Dobby *et al*, 2004), and in Home Office funded research among prison governors.

Qualities and values, competencies and engagement

In drawing together this 70 years of research, it is valuable to distinguish three requirements for successful leadership. These are:

- qualities and values
- leadership competencies
- engaging leadership behaviour.

Qualities and values

A quality can be defined as a ‘peculiar and essential characteristic; nature; an inherent feature; a property; superiority in kind; a distinguishable attribute; a characteristic’ (Longman Publishing, 1990), while values are ‘a person’s principles or standards of behaviour’ (Oxford University Press, 1998). In the present context, personal qualities and values may be defined as

‘those cognitive and emotional characteristics of an individual that are essential prerequisites for appropriate managerial or leadership behaviour’.
(Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development, 2008)

Thus, for example, the personal quality of being resilient or tenacious is a requirement of someone who shows competency in achieving results, just as effective communication is a prerequisite for working in a team. However, showing resilience or tenacity does not guarantee achieving results any more than possessing emotional intelligence ensures effective team work, or having integrity ensures that someone can be a successful finance director.

It follows, then, that the possession of certain qualities and values is necessary, but not sufficient, for achieving success. If a leader is to be successful, they must learn to use their personal qualities and other attributes in certain ways, and to apply their values.

Competencies

The use of competency frameworks has become almost ubiquitous. Thus, for example, Bolden *et al* (2003) reviewed 29 such frameworks, which were being used in private sector organisations (including Lufthansa, Shell, and BAE Systems), in public sector organisations (including Senior Civil Service, NHS Leadership Qualities Framework, National College for School Leadership), and generically (including Investors in People, Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership).

However, in spite of popularity among those with a professional interest in leadership, the competency approach to leadership has been the subject of much criticism, both in the US and the UK (eg. Bolden & Gosling, 2006; Hollenbeck *et al*, 2006). On the basis of an extensive review of the literature, Bolden and Gosling (2006), and Hollenbeck *et al* (2006) cited various researchers who have pointed out that:

- the competency approach has been criticised for being overly reductionist, fragmenting the role of the manager rather than presenting an integrated whole
- competencies are frequently overly universalistic or generic, assuming that they are the same, no matter the nature of the situation, individual or task
- competencies focus on past or current performance, rather than future requirements, thereby reinforcing rather than challenging traditional ways of thinking
- competencies tend to focus on measurable behaviours and outcomes to the exclusion of more subtle qualities, interactions and situational factors
- what results is a rather limited and mechanistic approach to leadership.

Bolden and Gosling also pointed out that the initial concept of managerial competencies has been expanded to incorporate leadership as well as management. They go on to comment that:

'This expansion of the concept of competencies raises further concerns because of its tendency to disguise and embed rather than expose and challenge certain assumptions about the nature and work of leadership.'

In his article entitled *Don't Waste Time and Money*, Buckingham (2001) argued that however well-intentioned, the competency approach is based on the three flawed assumptions that:

- individuals who excel in the same role display the same behaviours
- such behaviours can be learned
- improving one's weaknesses necessarily leads to success.

Certainly, there is evidence that individual leaders achieve similar results using different approaches, despite significant personal flaws (McCall, 1998).

Hollenbeck *et al* criticised what they saw as the four assumptions on which the competency approach is based. Thus, they commented that:

- *'as a descendent of the long-discredited "great man" theory, competency models raise again the spectre of one set of traits, abilities, and behaviours... that make up the "great leader"'* (Hollenbeck *et al*, 2006)
- effective leaders are not the sum of a set of competencies, and that the research demonstrates that, *'what matters is not a*

person's sum score on a set of competencies, but how well [or as we would put it, in what way] a person uses what talents he or she has to get the job done'" (Hollenbeck *et al*, 2006).

They also questioned:

- whether the tautological assumption that, *'because senior management usually blesses competencies and sometimes even helps generate them, they are the most effective way to think about leader behaviour'*, is correct
- the assertion that when HR systems are based on competencies, these systems actually work effectively. In this context, Hollenbeck and McCall concluded that, *'we see little evidence that these systems, in place for years now, are producing more and better leaders in organisations'* (Hollenbeck *et al*, 2006).

In a similar vein, although the latest *National Occupational Standards in Management and Leadership* have been released (Management Standards Centre, 2004), there remains significant doubt about the extent to which these really relate to improved or superior practice (Grugulis, 1998, 2000; Holman & Hall, 1996; Swailes & Roodhouse, 2003). Indeed, most frameworks are singularly characterised by a lack of empirical evidence of their concurrent or predictive validity.

In addition, it can be argued that the competency approach *'reinforces a focus on the individual "leader", while restricting consideration of "leadership" as a distributed relational process'* (Bolden & Gosling, 2006).

In defence of competency frameworks, it should be pointed out that their value should be judged in terms of what they do, not in what they fail to do. What thoroughly researched, properly constructed competency frameworks – which are differentiated to meet the particular needs of different groups of managers and professionals – can do is define and describe what a leader needs to be able to do in order to achieve the goals and targets appropriate to their role. Thus:

'A competent leader may be defined as someone who enables the functioning of an organisation in a way that is goal directed, and is geared to developing processes and systems. This enables staff at all levels to plan effectively and efficiently, in order to achieve agreed goals.

High levels of competency can lead to a degree of consistency, and thereby enable staff to make

day-to-day decisions and short-term predictions, with a measure of confidence. Leadership competencies, which are often largely closed-ended in nature, are necessary in order that staff can undertake strategic planning, and in this way help to turn the vision of an organisation, department or team into a reality. (Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD), 2008)

Acceptance of such a definition leads to the self-evident conclusion that being competent is an essential characteristic of anyone who occupies a management or leadership role. It is equally true, particularly in the light of the earlier criticism, that competency on its own is not enough. To recast the phrase used earlier, being competent is necessary, but not sufficient, for leadership; the question to ask is: what else is required?

Engaging leadership

The answer to this question is that, if being competent can be thought of as the ‘what’ of that which leaders do, then that which enables a leader to take on a leadership role is the ‘how’. And the how of leadership is the way in which it is enacted, which can either be in a (post-heroic) nearly transformational or engaging way, or in a non-transformational, non-engaging way.

Engagement has been described as ‘a positive attitude held by the employee towards the organisation and its values. An engaged employee is aware of

business context, and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organisation’ (Robinson et al, 2004).

In the light of our research into the nature of nearly transformational, or engaging leadership, we propose the following definition.

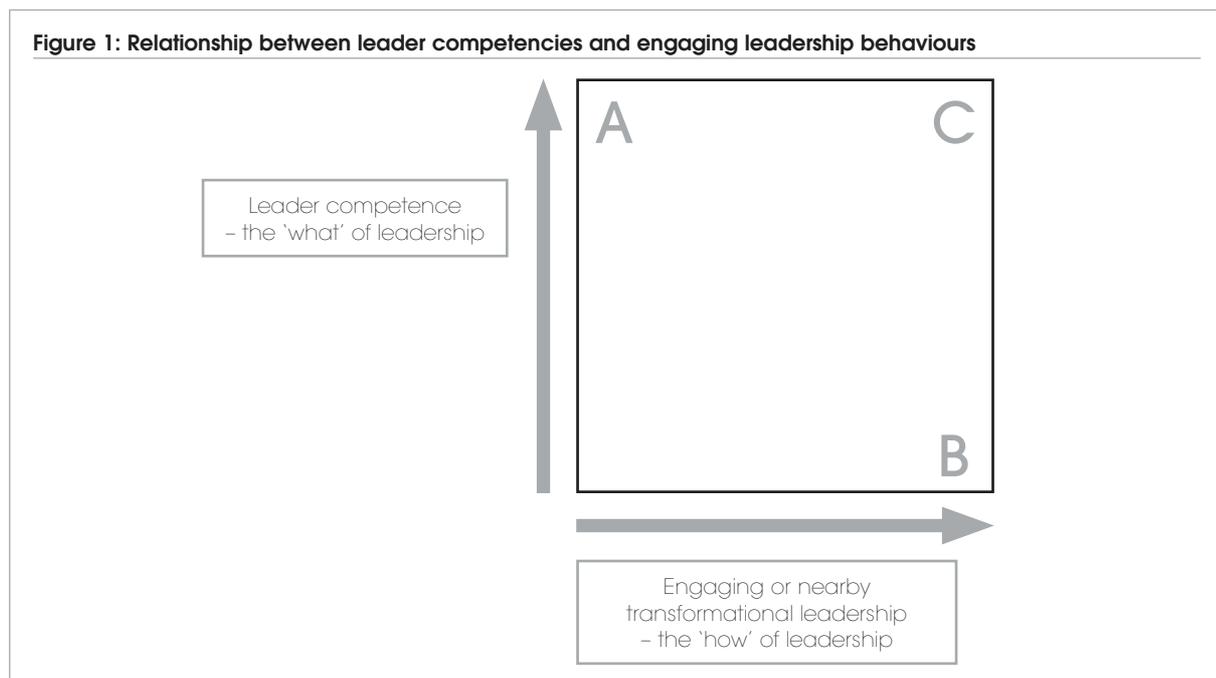
‘A nearly transformational or engaging leader may be defined as someone who encourages and enables the development of an organisation that is characterised by a culture based on integrity, openness and transparency, and the genuine valuing of others.

This shows itself in concern for the development and well-being of others, in the ability to unite different groups of stakeholders in articulating a joint vision, and in delegation of a kind that empowers and develops potential, coupled with the encouragement of questioning and of thinking which is critical as well as strategic.

Engaging leadership is essentially open-ended in nature, enabling organisations not only to cope with change, but also to be proactive in shaping their future. At all times engaging leadership behaviour is guided by ethical principles.’ (Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development, 2008)

The relationship between leadership competency and engaging leadership is summarised in **Figure 1**.

Thus, person A can be seen to be highly competent as a leader, but not very engaging in their behaviour; perhaps the kind of person who is very detailed in their



planning, or who can devise very effective systems for quality control, but shows a lack of understanding of, or concern for, the needs of others.

Conversely, person B is someone who, perhaps, shows great concern for others, and creates a supportive environment in which all staff are valued, but is unable to deliver what is required of them in terms of achieving goals or meeting agreed targets on time. Such a person's style of leadership is highly engaging, but they show a low level of competency as a leader.

Person C, then, is the kind of manager or professional who, by acting in an engaging way, with all that entails, can use their competency as a leader in ways that are relevant to the particular individual or situation.

The relationship between competent and engaging leadership can be expressed in terms of the following musical simile.

'A competency framework could be considered like sheet music, a diagrammatic representation of the

melody. It is only in the arrangement, playing and performance, however, that the piece truly comes to life.' (Bolden & Gosling, 2006)

Put another way, competencies can be thought of as the 'what' of leadership – what is missing is the 'how'. What leaders need to strive for is to lead competently in an engaging way.

The relationship between personal qualities and values, leader competencies, and engaging leadership behaviours is summarised in **Figure 2**.

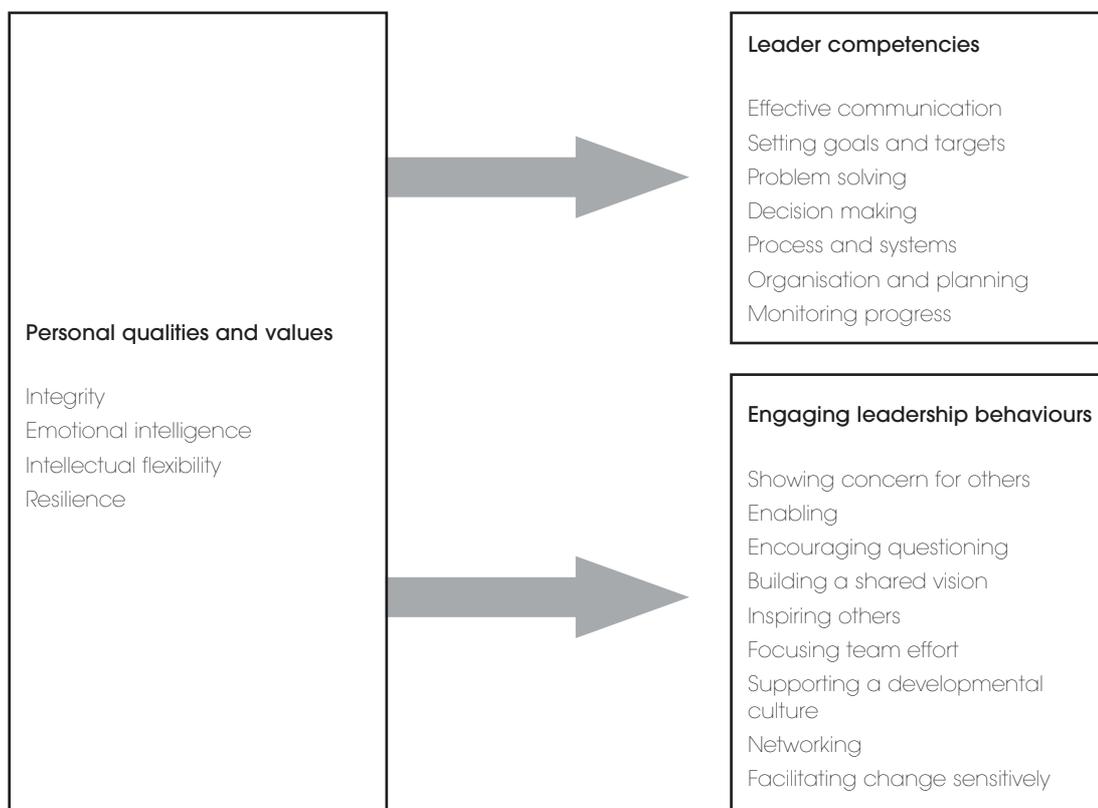
Evidence of the importance of engagement

Evidence of the effectiveness of an engaging style of leadership comes from empirical research, survey data, and case studies.

Empirical evidence

A national longitudinal study of the relationship between quality of leadership and both attitudes to work and well-being at work, and organisational

Figure 2: Relationship between personal qualities and values, leader competencies and engaging leadership behaviour.



performance, provides empirical evidence of the effectiveness of an engaging style of leadership (Alimo-Metcalfe *et al.*, 2007). A total of 46 multi-professional, mental health crisis resolution teams (CRTs) participated, involving 731 team members. These teams, which operate 24/7, 365 days of the year, were set up to treat individuals with mental health problems in the community, rather than referring them for inpatient care (Department of Health, 2000). CRTs typically comprise 10 or more staff, drawn from the following professional areas: clinical psychologists; mental health nurses; occupational therapists; psychiatrists; social workers; and support staff. Although there is a designated team leader, the team is led by different individuals at different times of the day. Also, any team member performs a leadership role when working with a particular service user and their family. Accordingly, the focus was on assessing the quality of leadership in the team, rather than on any single individual.

Quality of leadership was assessed using the Leadership Culture and Change Inventory (LCCI™) (Alban-Metcalfe & Alimo-Metcalfe, 2003). This is an instrument that assesses the quality of leadership of organisations, departments or teams in terms of both nearby transformational and competent behaviours.

It includes 12 items (dependent variables) that measure the impact of such behaviour on staff. Quality of leadership was assessed in terms of two transformational scales (engaging with others, 16 items; $\alpha = .95$; and visionary leadership, 7 items; $\alpha = .90$), and one competency scale (leadership capabilities, 14 items; $\alpha = .94$). The dependent variables were five facets of staff attitudes to work such as job satisfaction, motivation and commitment, and seven facets of well-being such as self-esteem, team spirit, and reduced job-related stress. Quantitative data were also collected in relation to nine contextual factors such as age of team, composition of team, and mental illness needs index for the area.

Staff completed the LCCI at time one (baseline) and organisational performance, measured in terms of productivity, was assessed 12 months later. Productivity was defined as the ratio of the number of assessments made by the team to the number of referrals for inpatient care as an average over a 12-month period, divided by the number of members of the team.

Stepwise multiple regression analyses of the relationship between quality of leadership as measured using the three scales and staff attitudes and well-being are presented in **Table 1** (Alimo-Metcalfe *et al.*, 2007, 2008a).

Table 1: Multiple regression of leadership scales against staff attitudes to work and well-being at work, for whole sample (n=731) (beta coefficients) ($p \leq .05$)

Impact measure/leadership scale	Engaging with others	Shared vision	Leadership capabilities
Attitudes to work			
A high level of job satisfaction	.56	-	.17
A high level of motivation to achieve	.41	.18	.18
Staff who are motivated to achieve beyond their expectations	.46	-	.21
A strong sense of job commitment	.65	-	-
A strong sense of commitment to the organisation	.65	-	-
Well-being at work			
A high sense of fulfilment among staff	.48	.28	-
A high level of self-esteem among staff	.46	.23	-
A high level of self-confidence	.61	-	.12
A low level of job-related stress	.22	.24	-
A low level of job-related emotional exhaustion	.34	.14	-
A strong sense of team spirit	.70	-	-
A strong sense of team effectiveness	.26	.18	.33

As can be seen, the degree to which members see their team as capable in leadership does positively affect motivation, job satisfaction and a strong sense of team effectiveness, though not the other aspects of commitment and well-being. The extent to which the team is seen as displaying visionary leadership also significantly positively affects motivation, and most of the aspects of well-being, including a sense of fulfilment and, importantly, reduce job-related stress and exhaustion, as well as a strong sense of team effectiveness. However, only the scale 'Engaging with others' significantly affects all aspects of positive attitudes to work, and all aspects of well-being, including contributing to a strong sense of team spirit, which neither of the other two scales predicts.

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses and structural equation modelling revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between 'Engaging with others' and productivity, even when the effect of the nine contextual factors (which were also significant predictors) had been taken into account ($p < .05$ in each case). No such relationship was found for either 'Shared vision' or 'Leadership capabilities' (Alimo-Metcalfe *et al*, 2007, 2009). In other words, only the leadership behaviours assessed by the 'Engaging with others' scale were a significant predictor of performance.

What this evidence suggests is that:

- the kind of distributed leadership that involves engagement with others can be shown to have a significant impact on performance
- so too can a range of situational or contextual factors. At a technical level, it also provides evidence of the criterion validity of the LCCI.

Implications for the development of leaders and leadership, and for creating the cultural and other conditions that will enable leaders (at all levels) to be optimally effective, will be discussed in part two of this paper.

Survey data

Over the last few years, numerous studies have shown that engagement pays. For example, a US survey over the last five years of 24 publicly traded companies with a total of over 250,000 employees found that the stock prices of the 11 high morale companies increased an average of 19.4%, while those of other companies in the same industries increased by an average of only eight per cent – a margin of 240% (Sirota Survey Intelligence, 2006).

A UK study by Watson-Wyatt (2006) concluded that a company with highly-engaged employees typically achieves a financial performance four times greater than a company in the same sector with poor employee attitudes. Meanwhile, Towers Perrin (2005) concluded from its survey of more than 85,000 people working for large and mid-sized companies in 16 countries, that:

'while many people are keen to contribute more at work, the behaviour of their managers and the culture of their organisations is actively discouraging them from doing so'.

Case studies

There is case study evidence of the effectiveness of an engaging style of leadership in private and public sector organisations using the TLQ (eg. Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2003; Alimo-Metcalfe & Bradley, 2008; Sinclair & Webster, 2007). In one example, the TLQ was used on a leadership and culture change programme involving 120 local government senior managers over an 18-month period. The programme was evaluated formally by asking direct reports for evidence of the way in which their line manager's behaviour changed after a period of 12 months. In all cases, positive changes were reported. Furthermore, following this intervention, not only did the authority increase in its comprehensive performance assessment rating, and receive a national award in the area of services in which it had been perceived as underperforming (two measured of organisational performance), but also became the first public sector organisation to be named among the top 20 of the *Sunday Times* best employers list (Alimo-Metcalfe & Bradley, 2008). Three other case studies, involving a large university, an NHS primary care trust, and Northern Rail, are presented in the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development publication, *Engaging Leadership: Creating organisations that maximise the potential of their people* (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2008).

Where does this leave us?

Where this leaves us is with a recognition that there is the need to distinguish between the extent to which those who occupy a leadership role possess certain personal qualities and values, the extent to which they perform their role in a competent way, and the extent to which they perform their role in an engaging way.

Conceptual analyses and empirical evidence indicate that neither simply the possession of certain personal attributes nor competent leader behaviours on their own are sufficient for effective leadership.

With regard to competencies and competency frameworks, the fundamental issue is one of fitness for purpose. This can only be achieved if:

- empirical sector-specific research is undertaken to ensure that what is assessed is relevant to managers and professionals working in that particular area, rather than being generic
- different levels of competency are assessed, ensuring that there is continuity, rather than disjunction, in the competencies required of staff at different levels and in different roles
- it is recognised that being competent is only part of the story.

With regard to the last of these points, one might paraphrase a comment made by Neil Kinnock when describing the 1981 Special Education Act in another context: competencies can be likened to Brighton Pier, very fine in their own way, but not a good way of getting to France.

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John Alban-Metcalfe

John read Zoology at Oxford, and later became qualified as a Psychologist. After a career spanning 30-plus years in teacher education, during which time he was involved in a number of European projects, he was a Founding Director of Real World Group. Joint research undertaken with Professor Beverly Alimo-Metcalfe has led to the development of a number of 360-degree individual and organisational diagnostic instruments, the validity of which has been established through peer review. John has been involved in a number of national research projects, including those funded by the Department of Health, the Home Office, the National College for School Leadership, and

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Beverly Alimo-Metcalfe

Beverly is Professor of Leadership at the University of Bradford School of Management, Professor Emeritus at Leeds University, and Chief Executive of Real World Group. She has established an international reputation in the area of leadership and organisational culture, with a particular interest in the role of women in organisations. She is passionate about dispelling the myths in this area. In 2000, she and Dr John Alban-Metcalfe undertook the largest-ever single study of leadership, involving an inclusive sample of over 4,000 managers and professionals in public and private sector organisations, on the basis of which they developed the (Engaging) Transformational Leadership

Questionnaire (TLQ)™ 360-degree diagnostic feedback instrument. This instrument has been adopted by major organisations working in all aspects of the UK public sector, and by private sector companies, and is also being used internationally. The model meets the need for a non-heroic approach to assessing 'nearby' transformational or 'engaging' leadership. More recently, she was principal investigator in a three-year empirical, longitudinal study which found a significant predictive relationship between engaging leadership and organisational performance. A by-product of this research was the validation of an organisational diagnostic instrument, the Leadership Culture & Change Inventory (LCCI)™. Beverly is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society.