



# Integrative leadership, partnership working and wicked problems: a conceptual analysis

**Juliette Alban-Metcalf**  
Real World Group, UK

**Beverly Alimo-Metcalf**  
School of Management University of Bradford and Real World Group, UK

## Abstract

After examining the nature and significance of 'integrative' leadership, a distinction is drawn between five different formal leadership roles. It is suggested that they tend to be associated with different kinds of problem ('wicked', 'tame' and 'crisis'). The paper goes on to consider (1) the different leadership competencies required (political, strategic and operational), and evidence of a cause-effect relationship between an engaging style of leadership and productivity, and (2) evidence of the impact of leadership behaviour on others. Finally, the paper advocates a modified version of the model of leadership development proposed by Bennington and Hartley (2009).

## Key words

Integrative leadership; leadership; partnership working; wicked problems; assessment; leadership roles.

## Nature and significance of integrative leadership

In a special edition of *Leadership Quarterly* (Volume 2, issue 2, 2010), Crosby, Bryson and others focused attention on the relationship between 'integrative leadership' and partnership working. Integrative leadership is a process that involves

*'bringing together diverse groups and organizations in semi-permanent ways – and typically across sector boundaries – to remedy complex public problems and achieve the common good'*. (Crosby & Bryson, 2010: 211)

This they see as being essential to effective partnership working. To understand what is at the heart of integrative leadership, there is the need to move away from 'traditional' models of dyadic leadership. As Morse (2010: 233) pointed out,

*'The majority of leadership theories rest on hierarchical assumptions and a leader-follower dynamic that breaks down in the collaborative context'*.

In place of this, Huxman and Vangen (2005: 2020) advocated a '*what makes things happen in a collaboration*' approach, arguing that structures,

processes and participants are inextricably interconnected. Also, there is the need to recognise that integrative leadership is not limited to partnership working, and that it has a much wider range of applicability.

Integrative leadership is best understood as a communal form of leadership, whereby individuals succeed, through working collaboratively with one another. It is the antithesis of conceptions of leadership as a process undertaken by an *'autonomous, self-determining individual with a secure unitary identity [who sees themselves at] the centre of the social universe'* (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000: 89), and with leaders whose behaviour is characteristically *'solipsistic'*, and often *'autocratic'*. Integrative leadership is a *shared* activity, with *shared* responsibilities.

Indeed, one of the most important roles for integrative leaders is to promote *organisational learning* (Senge, 1990), since this is a significant determinant of long-term performance and survival for organisations and partnerships. As Yulk (2009: 50) pointed out,

*'One of greatest challenges for leadership at all levels in organisations is to create the type of conditions that encourage, facilitate, and sustain a favourable level of innovation and collective learning'*.

Integrative leadership is the kind of leadership that is assessed by the *Board Leadership Quality 360 – BLQ360*, a tool devised for use by the Audit Commission to assess the functioning of the boards of NHS trusts (Alimo-Metcalfe & Beasley, 2010), and the *Partnership Leadership Quality 360 – Partnership Working 360* (Real World Group, 2010a). There the focus is on the quality of the leadership shown by groups (boards, working parties, etc) as a whole, rather than by individuals. In the BLQ360, integrative leadership quality is assessed with reference to eight dimensions (scales):

- engaging as an effective team
- constructive challenge
- ensuring shared vision
- promoting quality and improvement
- connecting and influencing
- effective performance and risk-taking
- clarity and accountability
- personal qualities and values.

Plus, in the *Partnership 360*, the scales:

- commitment to partnership
  - political skills
  - systems thinking
  - commissioning
- (see **Figure 1**).

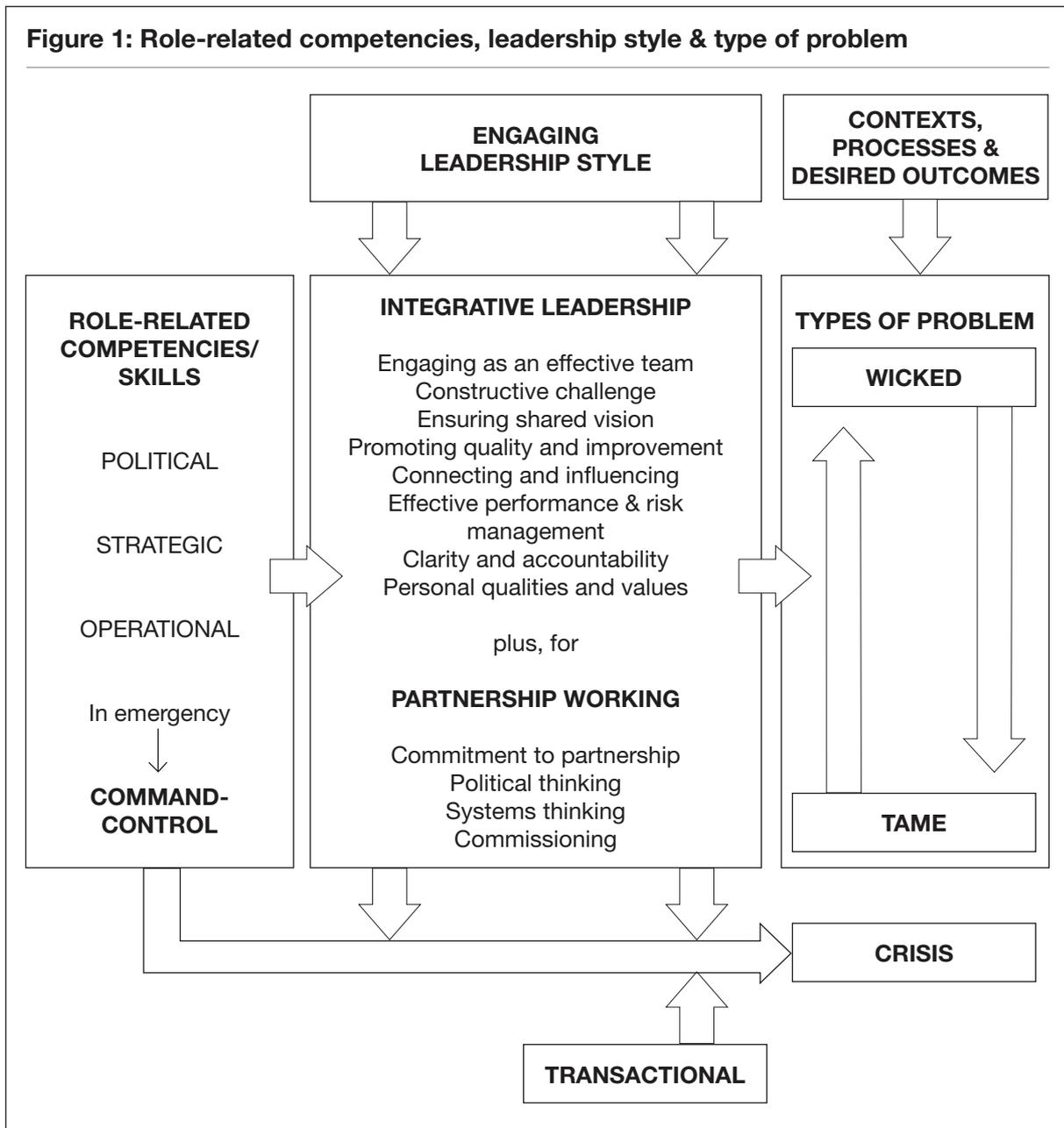
Leaders influence people and events directly by what they say and what they do, and indirectly by implementing or modifying relevant programmes, systems and structures (Yukl & Lepsinger, 2004).

In his analysis of leadership and obstacles to collective learning, Yulk (2009) suggested that:

1. top management should have most of the responsibility for leading change and innovation; but
2. many CEOs are too insulated to recognise opportunities and threats, though they can help avoid obstacles to implementation
3. leaders at all levels can help *'to build and sustain a culture with strong values for learning, innovation, experimentation, flexibility, and continuous improvement'* (p52)
4. the development of social networks is desirable since problems arise where there is *'restriction of information and knowledge that would facilitate collective learning and collective problem solving'* (p52)
5. differentiation among major subunits within an organisation [or partnership] can lead to greater efficiency, but that this has to be balanced against greater information-sharing, which can lead to improved co-operation and increased trust
6. conflict is likely to arise between different stakeholders, eg. about objectives and priorities, decisions about the kind of learning that should be supported, and which actions to implement.

These are all issues that the two instruments address.

Following Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe (2008), Bolden and Gosling (2006), Crosby & Bryson (2010) and others, integrative leadership can be analysed in terms of *'leadership competencies'* (the *'what'* of leadership) (Crosby



& Bryson, 2005; Gertha-Taylor, 2008) and 'leadership style' (the 'how' of leadership) (Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2008). A further dimension is the *impact* of leaders' behaviour on others, particularly their direct reports, the organisation and the community they serve. Impact on staff is measurable in terms of degree of *engagement* (Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2008; Robinson *et al*, 2004). For greatest positive impact on staff and others, and on performance, leaders need to perform

competently, in an engaging way (Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2008).

### Leadership roles

Leadership does not manifest itself in a vacuum, so it is instructive to consider the different leadership roles and associated contexts in which it occurs.

- *Political role* – undertaken by individuals and groups within or interacting with central government

departments and agencies. The range of activity can be categorised as: executive; scrutiny; regulatory; and advocacy (Morrell & Hartley, 2006). Many of the problems they face are 'wicked' or 'adaptive' (see below), others are more or less 'tame'; some are 'crisis' problems that require command-and-control behaviour. The competencies/skills required are principally 'political' and 'strategic'.

- *Civic/board level role* – undertaken by individuals, groups of elected and appointed representatives and chief executives and senior officers, in private, public and third sector organisations. Some of the problems they face are 'wicked', many are 'tame'; some are 'crisis' problems. The competencies/skills required are also principally political and strategic.
- *Senior management role* – undertaken by individuals and groups with responsibility to establish and oversee the implementation of strategies designed to achieve an organisation's mission and the vision. Although some of the problems are 'wicked', the great majority are 'tame'; some are 'crisis' problems. The competencies/skills required are largely political and strategic, and to a certain extent, 'operational'.
- *Middle management role* – undertaken by individuals and groups with responsibility to ensure the implementation of strategies by establishing and monitoring effective systems and processes. The problems they face are 'tame' or 'technical'; some are 'crisis' problems. Leadership is more concerned about dealing with day-to-day activities, requiring operational skills, though leaders at these levels are increasingly being encouraged to take a more strategic perspective (Wellings & Schweyer, 2007).
- *Supervisory role* – undertaken by individuals and groups with responsibility for frontline delivery of services. The problems they face are presented as 'tame' or 'technical'; some are 'crisis' problems.

The *Command-and-control* may be performed by individuals who can be at any of the five levels described above. An example of someone in a political category would be the assumption of the 'gold command' role in a situation involving a major incident of civil unrest, such as a riot. An operational example would be a watch manager directing firefighters and the public in the event of a serious accident.

Leadership in each of the first three roles has, as a requirement, to involve 'political skills' and 'whole systems' thinking (eg. Bennington & Hartley, 2009; Morrell & Hartley, 2006). It includes the kinds of leadership behaviour that Crossan and colleagues (2008) described as 'transcendent leadership': the kind of leadership that can cope with *dynamic* environments, and what Crosby and Bryson (2010) and Morse (2010) call 'integrative leadership'. For Crossan and colleagues (2008), a strategic leader is one '*who leads within and amongst the levels of self, others, and organization*', where leadership is seen as comprising '*the alignment of three interrelated areas: environment, strategy, and organization*'. Integrative leadership is also relevant at middle management and supervisory levels in the context of effective teamworking.

In the context of partnership working: leaders in a political or civic/board level role may identify the imperative of promoting greater cross-sector collaboration, or even direct that it should occur; leaders in a senior management role may identify and implement cross-organisational or cross-sector working, so as to improve the quality of provision offered; leaders in a middle management or supervisory role may work more closely together in the generation of innovative practices, or implementing new ways of working.

### **Contexts, processes and desired outcomes**

The extent to which leadership behaviour achieves its desired goals is influenced to a large extent by a wide range of other contextual factors (Liden & Antonakis, 2009). Some of these are related to terms of reference that have been agreed or imposed, others to day-to-day factors, such as the availability of resources, or current processes and practices, and others to the nature of the goals to be achieved, and the criteria for judging success.

These can be summarised as follows.

- Contextual factors – national and local imperatives; possible agents of change; existing relationships; organisational culture; organisational context.
- Constraints – top-down vs bottom-up approaches; type and level of collaboration; power imbalances; institutional ‘logics’.
- Structure and governance – initial agreement; cross-organisational and/or cross-sector structures; governance.
- Kinds of problem to be addressed – ‘wicked’, ‘tame’, ‘crisis’.
- Processes and practices – boundary spanning; implementing agreements; joint planning; building leadership capacity.
- Outcomes and accountabilities – short-term, medium-term and long-term goals and targets; formative and summative evaluations (Crosby & Bryson, 2010; Real World Group, 2010b).

The short-term outcomes of collaborative working include: agreement that a certain course of action will contribute to the common good and create public value and be sustainable (Bozeman, 2007); recognition of areas of strength and weakness (Bozeman, 2007; Bryson & Crosby, 2008); formulation of agreements and strategies that are likely to increase social, intellectual and political capital, and be sustainable; creation of ‘*common ground for action*’ (Mathews & McAfee, 2003); establishment of systems thinking (Senge, 1990; Senge *et al.*, 2008); more effective working processes; and increased performance. These are complemented by, and achieved through: collaborative learning (Daniels & Walker, 1996); creating public knowledge (Bono *et al.*, 2010; Yankelovick, 1991); mutual learning (Luke, 1998); and commitment, at both an individual and an organisational level (Inlogov/West Midlands Shires’ Compact, undated), which can be assessed in terms of level of staff engagement, sense of well-being at work and performance (Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2008).

In the medium and long terms there is likely to be: closer intra-organisational and inter-organisational co-operation; more effective working practices; jointly-promoted learning activity; the development of new

partnership arrangements (Lawrence *et al.*, 2002); sustainable effective working processes; and continuing increases in performance. And, associated with these: changed perceptions; less inter-organisational conflict; increased staff engagement and sense of well-being at work; continually effective, harmonious working practices; shaping of a new kind of ‘partnership’ culture (Brewer & Seldon, 2000; Rainey & Syeinbauer, 1999); increased social capital (Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban Metcalfe, 2008; Gray, 2000); and a better return on investment.

## Kinds of problem

The relevance of an integrative style of leadership, with its emphasis on co-operation and collaborative learning, comes into sharp focus when one considers some of the kinds of problem with which leaders, particularly those in a political, civic/board, or senior managerial role, are faced.

In 1967, Churchman introduced the concept of ‘wicked’ problems, which he saw as being distinct from ‘tame’ or ‘technical’ problems. Using this terminology:

- *wicked* or adaptive problems are those that exhibit one or more of the following characteristics: complex; often intractable; novel, and without an apparent solution. They involve a high level of uncertainty, and are polycentric, multi-causal, dynamic and inter-active. They do not necessarily lead to ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers, only better or worse outcomes; and the ‘solutions’ that emerge often generate more problems.
- *tame* or technical problems are typically: simple or, if complicated, are still resolvable; and likely to have occurred before. They involve a limited degree of uncertainty, and are structured, uni-causal, and involve ‘mechanical’ cause–effect relationships. They usually lead to an identifiable solution (eg. Heifetz, 1994; Rittel & Webber, 1973).

The two vertical arrows in the box to the right of **Figure 1** denote that wicked and tame problems can be thought of as being along a continuum.

A third kind of problem is referred to as a ‘crisis’ problem, that is, a problem which:

- characteristically requires an urgent response to an actually or potentially serious consequence; has limited time for decision-making and action; and in which uncertainty is managed through clear decisions. At different stages in solving this kind of problem, both integrative leadership and 'transactional' leadership (Bass, 1998) are likely to be appropriate.

Applying this to a situation involving a disturbance in a prison, what is crucial is that the person in bronze, silver or gold command (1) be open to receiving all the relevant information, (2) be open to gaining information about any change in circumstances, as and when that occurs, and (3) act decisively, and with appropriate expedition. While stages (1) and (2) will benefit from an integrative approach, such that the greatest amount of information and insight can be gained, shared and updated, as appropriate, stage (3) requires a transactional style of leadership; commands issued must be followed. The horizontal arrow at the bottom of *Figure 1* seeks to represent both integrative and transactional input to crisis situations.

## **Integrative leadership**

### **The 'what'**

As noted, the leadership competencies required for each of these identified roles are: political; strategic; and/or operational.

Gertha-Taylor (2008) reported the initial findings of an ongoing project designed to identify the competencies required for integrative leadership in the US public sector. She pointed to research by Goldsmith and Eggers, which suggested that managing across boundaries is time-consuming and

*'requires attitudes and behaviors not commonly developed as part of the typical public manager's experience'* (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004: 165).

The behaviours included: big-picture thinking; coaching; mediation; negotiation; risk analysis; contract management; strategic thinking; interpersonal communication; and team building. Derived from lists of competencies created by others, the US Office of Public Management competencies include: partnering; political savvy; and influencing/negotiation. Gertha-Taylor

concluded, however, that, *'Although these lists are insightful, most are anecdotal and some are contradictory'* (2008: 104).

In an empirical study of public managers rated as 'superior' versus 'average', Gertha-Taylor (2008) found significant differences on three out of 12 of Boyatzis' (1982) competencies. These were: interpersonal understanding; teamwork and co-operation; and team leadership. From this research, she concluded that, other than in the areas of team leadership, there was a 'disconnect' between human resource managers' and superior collaborators' perceptions of the skills necessary for effective collaboration, and went on to propose that attention be focused on the following three areas: interpersonal understanding (demonstrating empathy; understanding motivation); teamwork and co-operation (inclusive perspective on achievements; altruistic perspective on resource sharing; collaborative conflict resolution), and team leadership (bridging diversity; creating lines of sight).

This evidence should not, however, turn attention away from the need for leaders to show high levels of skill in such generic areas as 'communication', and 'organisation and planning', which are required by individuals and groups operating in a wide range of roles, and at different levels in their organisation. Equally important, but not necessarily differentiating between individuals and groups in integrative contexts, are more role-specific and/or level-specific competencies, such as 'conceptual thinking' or 'political skills'.

### **The 'how'**

Extensive surveys undertaken in the US and UK and empirical research undertaken in the UK, provide consistent evidence of a significant link between an engaging style of leadership and organisational performance (Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2008). Also, among multi-professional teams in the NHS, Alimo-Metcalfe and colleagues (2010) found evidence of a *cause-effect* relationship between 'engaging with others' and productivity, measured objectively.

Engaging leadership behaviour is defined as, *'leadership that has a powerful effect on the motivation, self-confidence, self-efficacy, or performance, of others'*; as such it is different from models of 'distant' leadership. The differences include: that it is non-heroic; that it sees a leader as a 'servant' (Greenleaf, 1970;

1996) and 'partner'; that leadership is seen as a shared process, distributed throughout an organisation (Gronn, 2002); that it is 'authentic' (Avolio & Walumbwa, 2006) and based on ethical principles (eg. Iles & Macaulay, 2007); and that there is an emphasis on 'openness', 'connectedness', empowerment, humility and humanity (eg. Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2005; 2006; 2008).

In the light of analyses and evidence that, on their own, leadership competencies are not effective in increasing organisational performance (Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2008; Bolden & Gosling, 2006; Hollenbeck *et al.*, 2006), **Figure 1** seeks to emphasise the need for all leaders to act competently, in an engaging way. Conceptually, engaging leadership can be analysed in terms of:

- engaging with individuals, by being sensitive to their needs, and providing support
- engaging with the organisation, including by supporting a developmental, non-blame culture, by inspiration, and by focusing team effort
- engaging with the community and other external stakeholders, through networking, and by building a *shared* vision
- engaging with ethical values, at a personal and an organisational and/or partnership level (Alban-Metcalfe & Alimo-Metcalfe, 2010).

### Impact of leadership behaviour on staff and others

There is consistent evidence that certain kinds of leadership behaviour can have a positive impact on staff attitudes to work, and their sense of well-being at work (eg. Alimo-Metcalfe *et al.*, 2008; Bass, 1998; van Breukelen *et al.*, 2006). Also, some of these attitudes, such as job satisfaction, organisational commitment and reduced job-related stress, contribute to staff engagement (eg. Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2008; Robinson *et al.*, 2004). While these attitudes are of the utmost importance in partnership working, so too are the ability to build trust and to manage conflict (Crosby & Bryson, 2010).

That *trust-building* is an ongoing requirement for successful collaborations (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Ring & Van de Ven, 1994) is evident. Trust manifests itself in different

contexts, including: interpersonal behaviour; confidence in organisational competence and anticipated performance; and a common bond or sense of goodwill (Chen & Graddy, 2005). Its relevance is evident in a wide range of contexts that extend from information sharing, though achieving even small successes, to following through agreed courses of action (Arino & de la Torre, 1998; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Merrill-Sands & Sheridan, 1996).

The potential for conflict, and the need to *manage conflict*, emerge when different partners bring with them differing aims and expectations, and differing views about strategies and tactics, and when they attempt to establish differential levels of control over decisions (Crosby & Bryson, 2010). The extent to which there is likely to be conflict is related, in part, to how fundamental the issue is. Thus, proposed changes in systems are likely to cause more conflict than changes in mode of delivery (Bolland & Wilson, 1994). Levels of conflict also vary in relation to the stage or phase through which the collaboration agenda is passing (Gray, 2000).

### Leadership development

If it is accepted that integrative leadership is, above all, concerned with individuals working collaboratively together, this suggests that the kind of leadership development that is required for developing integrative leadership may be radically different from the much criticised traditional approach (eg. Bennington & Hartley, 2009; Bolden & Gosling, 2006; Hollenbeck *et al.*, 2006). A more appropriate structure is that summarised in **Figure 2**.

In the traditional approach the emphasis is on development activities that are focused on an individual or a group of individuals, participating as independent agents (Bennington & Hartley, 2009). Typically, the starting point is a theory of leadership, which is most commonly based on a competency framework (Iles & Preece, 2006), and the developmental activities are undertaken at a retreat (conference centre or management centre). The result can often be that the individual participants benefit by becoming more self-aware, and being able to perform certain actions more efficiently and effectively. In other words, there is an increase in 'human capital'. However, such capital is not necessarily available, or indeed relevant, to the organisation as a whole (Alban-Metcalfe *et al.*, 2009).

**Figure 2: 'Whole Systems' Leadership Development**

	<b>Traditional, competency-based approach</b>	<b>Engaging, 'whole systems' approach</b>
<b>Focus of attention</b>	The individual	The workgroup or the team
<b>Starting point</b>	Theory	Particular problems
<b>Contents</b>	Individual-focused developmental activities	Current and future practice Activities in which the focus is on <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identifying specific problems</li> <li>• proposing appropriate action</li> </ul>
<b>Location</b>	A retreat	The front-line
<b>Method of working</b>	Individual focused	Team working based on <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• trust &amp; mutual respect</li> <li>• valuing of others' contribution</li> <li>• critical analysis</li> <li>• rigorous reflection on experience</li> <li>• engaging leadership</li> </ul>
<b>Result</b>	Increase in human capital	Increase in human & social capital

Based on the 'Warwick Model' (Bennington & Hartley, 2009)

In contrast, a model of leadership that is predicated on adopting a form of leadership that involves 'leading competently, in an engaging way' is more suited to developing integrative leadership. Here, the focus of attention is the team, the working group, the whole organisation, or the partnership, and the starting point is particular problems that have to be addressed, and/or analyses and evaluations relevant to current and future practice, in 'real life' situations and contexts. Appropriately, the principal location is the workplace, though this does not preclude the need for time spent away. The focus is on groups, teams and organisations working together. In order to be optimally effective, working relationships must be based on trust of, and mutual respect for, each of the participants, and valuing of others' contributions. The content of what is discussed must be subject to critical analysis and rigorous reflection on, and evaluation of, past experience, while the most effective style of leadership is one that causes all participants to be fully engaged (Alban-Metcalfe *et al*, 2009; Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2008; McCallum & O'Connell, 2009). In this way, benefits can be realised for organisations, partnerships and communities, resulting in

an increase in 'social capital', which has been defined as

*'the goodwill available to individuals or groups. Its source lies in the structure and content of the actor's social relations. Its effects flow from the information, influence, and solidarity it makes available to the actor'* (Adler & Kwon, 2002).

## Conclusion

Senior managers' views of what leads to engagement (Robinson & Hayday, 2009), correspond with the findings of Alimo-Metcalfe and colleagues (2007; 2010), and of Wellings and Schweyer (2007). These include the need: to become more strategic, and less task-focused; to tackle poor performance and difficult behaviour; to focus on clarity of expectations, objectives, explanations and feedback; to adopt a methodical, consistent and phased approach to managing poor performance; to use interpersonal skills of empathy, understanding, communication and persuasion when dealing with difficult people; to be straight forward and honest when breaking bad news; and to recognise and develop high performers. Each of these applies equally,

at a team, organisational or partnership level, to what is required of integrative leadership. The principal differences in enactment between these levels lie in that the specific goals of integrative leadership may involve intra-organisational or inter-organisational, and/or intra-sector or inter-sector, collaboration. However, in each case, achievement of effective collaboration requires a focus on the leadership of groups of individuals working together as coherent teams, with shared responsibilities, in different roles, and at different levels, in a competent and engaging way.

### Implications for leadership in practice

Integrative leadership constitutes a *new paradigm*, which requires the adoption of a different kind of mindset, in which the effective functioning of a team, acting as a whole, is the goal. The practical implications of this include that:

- the leadership of the team involves shared responsibility of team members
- integrative leadership in different contexts requires different sets of skills or competencies
- fundamental to its success, in all contexts, is the ability of a team to fully engage all team members, and those with whom the team interacts
- integrative leadership will be most effective where relevant leadership competencies are enacted in an engaging way
- the different perspectives that members of a team, working collaboratively, can bring will enable teams to tackle even wicked problems most effectively
- leadership development should be context-relevant, and result in an increase in social as well as human capital.

### Address for correspondence

Juliette Alban-Metcalf  
Real World Group  
UK  
Email: juliette.alban-metcalf@realworld-group.com

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**Juliette Alban-Metcalf** is the Managing Director of Real World Group. She read Psychology at University of London Goldsmiths, and subsequently obtained an MSc in Occupational Psychology at University of London Birkbeck, and an MS in Positive Organizational Development at Case Western Reserve University, Ohio. Juliette is the author of the number of major research reports in the area of Equality and Diversity for organisations that include the Improvement and Development Agency, the Irish Disability Agency, and the Greater London Authority. She has also undertaken a large number of research projects in leadership and culture change.



**Beverly Alimo-Metcalf** 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-Metcalf undertook the largest-ever single study of leadership, on the basis of which they developed the (Engaging) Transformational Leadership Questionnaire (TLQ)<sup>™</sup> 360-degree diagnostic feedback instrument. More recently, she was principal investigator in a 3-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)<sup>™</sup>. Beverly is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society.