

How To Be A Real Practice Leader

Workshop Notes/Prompts

Introduce self, books.

You can email me at tonyosgood@protonmail.com if you ever fancy a chat or have a question. On my website you'll find articles, talks and stuff. I'll put today's talk up, and tomorrow's keynote.

In this workshop we'll think about what the difference is between a manager and a practice leader, what a real practice leader has to think about, and what barriers to being a practice leader you can expect to experience. If the purpose of being a practice leader is to create capable environments, then they must enable capable staff. We'll talk about this.

Early on I was lucky enough to work under really shit managers who taught me how not to run a service. I had experiences of working for great practice leaders, too. Since then, whoever I've been employed by, in whatever role, I've always sought out practice leaders. Usually in pubs sitting in corners staying 'That's no way to run a fucking service.' As a research article notes, 'managers who lose their values are the ones we least admire.'

Practice leaders are pretty universally not entirely trusted by their organisations, especially if the senior managers aren't practice leaders themselves. But staff, parents, and people using services adore practice leaders. You see, a good practice leader is a terrible person to employ. You ask difficult questions. You're less interested in budgets and rotas, more in people. You're never satisfied! When I was a service manager the biggest pains in my arse were the best practice leaders.

First, let's see what people think a PL does in reality. Two minutes, small groups, come up with a list of attributes, not from books or articles – don't quote my stuff back at me – but from your experience.

FEEDBACK

Cross your arms. One way is management, one is leadership. It takes practice to be a leader. (Did you see what I did there?) After a while you can become omni-dexterous – you can swing both ways.

A PL learns by doing the job and from being coached and mentored. They are not rule-government but contingency governed, as Skinner

might say. The contingencies that matter to practice leaders are rarely organisational, more personal. This makes them hard to manage.

Story – assignment feedback. ABA goddess trying to change my behaviour. She didn't control any contingency to motivate me, so tried to punish me.

Upstream... The person trying to find out who the hell is throwing people in the river is the practice leader. They're curious about getting things right. They ask lots of questions, but most importantly, they do shit about it.

As alluded to earlier, organisations sometimes *say* they want practice leadership. PL is in vogue. But organisations are a little bit like first dates. They want to look interesting and attractive. They try to impress you to get you to work for them. They say the right things. After a while, their true selves appear – the nose picking, the not putting the toilet seat down, you know, maybe controlling and coercive behaviour. Stalking on social media. Treating you like a robot. Dehumanising.

Organisations like things predictable and controllable, because they want to stay in business so they seek to avoid trouble – they *like* boring. Vanilla.

But while a practice leader might enjoy a little vanilla now and again, most of the practice leaders I know prefer Cherry Garcia and Tutti Frutti. Organisations trust a manager more than a leader, because a manager knows how to keep to the straight road, whereas a practice leader wants to go off-road to find a better view.

Organisations will dampen down your creativity. When you are eventually given a chance to be creative and are asked your opinion, you might have learned to say only what your idiot boss wants to hear rather than what you really think. The research from organisational psych is pretty clear – problems senior managers worry about were put there by senior managers setting the culture. If you've a senior manager who is a practice leader – who is present rather than absent – hold on to her. She can turn up and work a shift without batting an eyelash.

Remember I'm talking roles not people. The role of management is different from the role of leader. Funnily enough, these terms are used interchangeably, and whilst sometimes a person might flit between manager and leader roles, the roles are different.

Gary LaVigna wrote that those who don't know how to manage are managing those who don't know what to do. This is funny but unfair. In most of the organisations I speak to it seems that those who don't

know how to manage are managing those who do know what to do but often aren't allowed to do it.

My point is we talk a lot about practice leaders, even though many of them find it hard to thrive in controlling organisations. The best practice leaders I know are employed by organisations but they work for people using services.

They are rarely satisfied with their organisation. Practice leadership is the key determinant of quality of support, and enabling a capable environment, but they can cause disruptions amongst senior managers, who, let us remember, may not know their arse from their elbow, only how to make decision.

Let's imagine you're here because you're practice leaders – you know it involves organising things, mentoring, coaching, showing people what to do – what are some of the constraints you've experienced – and remember, many of the problems the organisations talk about are put there by the organisation. So what gets in the way of being a practice leader. Three minutes, in small groups.

FEEDBACK

Barriers

- Psychological contracts, dissonance: saying one thing, doing another
- Disciplinary and informal cultures and formal cultures
- Organisations not enabling autonomy, loading best workers with managerial tasks
- Micro-management and incompetent oversight (lack of competence in SMTs – too far from practice)
- SMTs measuring the wrong things in the wrong ways, not including PL in analysing issues
- Lack of recognition of PL role – SMTS appointing less challenging people
- Becoming a fig leaf - tokenism
- SMTs not understanding difference between management and leadership – confounding the two
- The issue isn't recruiting PL but retaining good staff that could become PL given mentoring

A characteristic of many practice leaders is their love of what the literature calls dispersed leadership – a leader rarely makes decisions alone though they do canvas opinions democratically – which means decisions are made by teams. A team without a voice is not led but managed.

Decisions excluding the team – even if the team is consulted – are not often implemented as well as they might. If a team is involved in

decisions by a practice leader, the team are more likely to implement the idea. If you want to only change formal and explicit culture, tell people what to do. If you want to harness informal and tacit cultures to make them helpful rather than destructive, involve people, and treat what they tell you respectfully.

You do challenge each other, but in the end the practice leader summarises an agreed approach. Dispersed leadership means no individual voice dominates. Leaders then are democratic, managers, not so much.

Organisations often tend to hierarchical forms – but do remember flatter, less hierarchical organisations seem to be more responsive and dynamic to individuals living in them. Hierarchies make people stupid.

So what's the difference between the role of manager – which is an important function – and the role of a leader – which is also an important function? Three minutes, different groups – change the people you speak with, unless you're deeply attracted to someone in the first group.

FEEDBACK

If I wanted to contribute to my own support plan – to co-produce a guide on how I preferred to be understood – I'd want a leader not a manager. A leader 'manages meaning' – she watches, asks, listens, then leads an agreed approach, rather than manages people. She folds her ideas within mine or the team's. A manager, who might be tempted to fit me into pre-existing responses and programmes, works differently; being included by a leader is different than being managed.

Elliot & Mansell paper.

The role of managers has evolved to be largely administrative. Sometimes they manage multiple locations. This is the result of pressures from within organisations, and from outside. Inspections, contract funders, Key Performance Indicators. These often measure the wrong thing in the wrong way. In sociology we call this governmentality – people obliged to govern their own behaviour through paperwork and external standards and rules. But external standards don't improve quality, they ensure compliance. Which is different. Governmentality, which you can think of as bureaucracy, isn't good at meeting peoples' needs. It serves auditors looking for easy and measurable data.

A practice leader includes people – the team, people using services – in decisions that affect them. A manager manages your adoption of a

protocol, monitors how you do the job. A leader might want to find out why you're often late for work, a manager might tell you your performance is lacking. A practice leader checks how you're doing but involves you in the evaluation and in creating a solution. A practice leader steers the team to make a culture where everyone reflects on what they might do better. They do this by being an example – they demonstrate what works, explain why, and so teach through doing.

It is not leadership to pop in on someone for twenty minutes, make a few suggestions or write an email or report, and then take no responsibility for when things go wrong due to poor implementation, or take credit when things go right. Leadership is not about those with specialist knowledge or qualifications telling other what to do. It is being there to support the people who support. You see a lot of this boils down to the question 'who holds the power', and how you handle it.

We know from our work that no one is voiceless even if they do not speak. Neither are staff or families voiceless. You may be very busy, but if you don't make time for people, you're not a leader.

Skilled practice leaders know the story is not about them. Even if our training and status make us someone considered an authority, we are only minor characters in the story of people living in services.

A practice leader knows an institution is run for the benefit of staff rather than the benefit of people living in the service. A practice leader knows dehumanising practices are nurtured not by bad apples but bad systems that treat people as things. Think of Whitefield School, and the dozens of abuse scandals our history is littered with. A practice leader who embeds values such as inclusion and person-centredness into the culture can confront bad practice.

A practice leader will challenge such things; a practice leader works to help the team get their shit together, but they won't tolerate shit systems, not because they like causing their managers problems, but because people they serve are not things.

A practice leader knows being unheard whilst living in a large institution is the same as being unheard in a small community home save for the lack of secret places harbouring safety and privacy. Good is not good enough for practice leaders.

My wife, who is the brains of the outfit we call a family, and who has taken my retirement to imply she can expect a good homemade meal when she gets home from work, says it doesn't take a lot to shine in service land, and being a decent human goes a long way in dazzling people. Practice leaders shine because they're approachable, authentic, practical and able to do the job.

Practice leaders grow practice leaders – that’s what being a *real* practice leader is about – you grow great leaders. All organisations have to do is trust you to get the job done, and coach the next generation of leaders. Embedded in being a practice leader is the issue of passing on values to others by demonstrating what they look like in practice – what person-centredness looks like.

If an organisation’s says it wants to empower people using services, it is the practice leader that does this, not only by enabling people to take more control of decisions, but by empowering staff. Staff won’t enact a value if they themselves are not valued. Service that don’t deliver a good quality of life are incapable environments. The *opposite* of capable environments.

Values are safeguards. The reason for including divergent voices is that doing so is a social validity safeguard; it ensures the voice of the leader doesn’t become authoritarian.

Practice leaders are not born, and whether you spend a fortune at university or take a cheaper course, it won’t make you a practice leader. Practice leaders are grown by other practice leaders doing the actual job, not talking or writing about the job. In sociology, it’s called legitimate peripheral participation – think informal apprenticeships – and it is the conceptual basis of communities of practice.

Most practice leaders I know just get on with it. Many think all this current talk about practice leaders is a bit of a side show. Great support is just support as far as they're concerned – and whether we name it PBS, PCAS, Active Listening, Coaching – well, if it helps you get your shit together, go for it. You just have to take people seriously – staff and people using services are people not problems to manage. A practice leader helps people develop and grow and increase their capacity.

But for those who don't often recognise good support when it oozes out of the margins of the care plan and makes a mess of their desk – those so long removed from day to day support that they've lost touch as well as competency – when they *do* encounter a good practice leader, it must seem like they are caught in a fucking earthquake.