

Leadership in children's services: three different approaches

CASCADE seminar for the Welsh Government webinar series 2024

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Why focus on leadership? It can support (or hamper) change

*“... in creating change in children’s services, **culture eats training for breakfast** ... the local authority in this study was very typical of local authorities in the UK: it was **heavily driven by procedural understandings** of what social work practice should be.”*

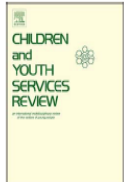
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A randomized controlled trial of training in Motivational Interviewing for child protection



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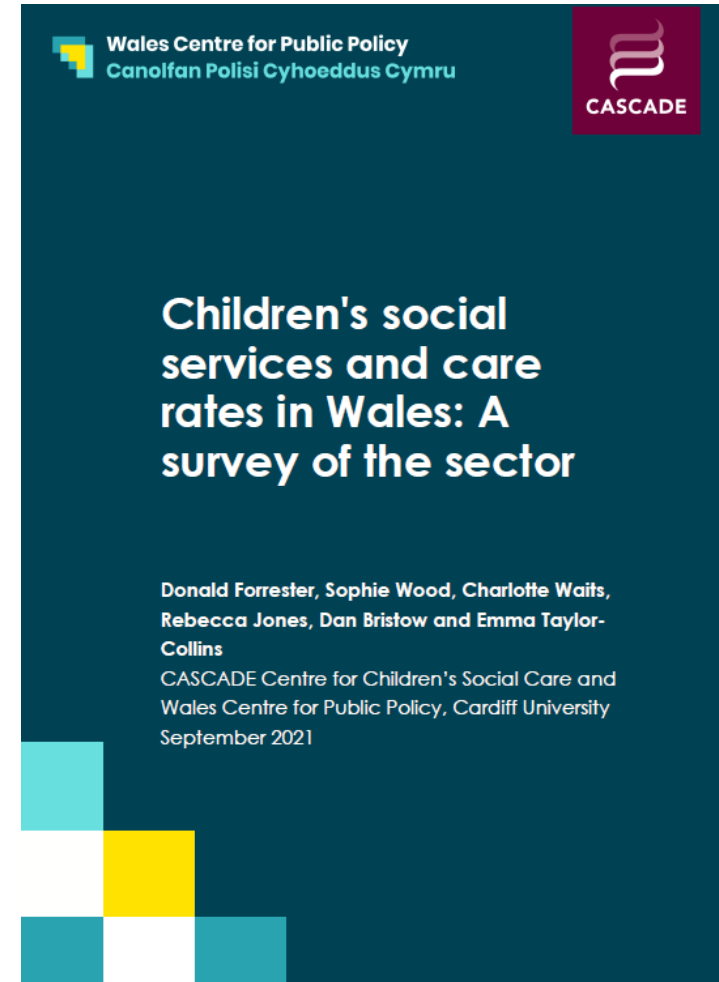
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Why focus on leadership? It can support a vision of practice

“There is significantly greater agreement in values between workers and leaders in LAs with decreasing rates compared to those with increasing rates.”



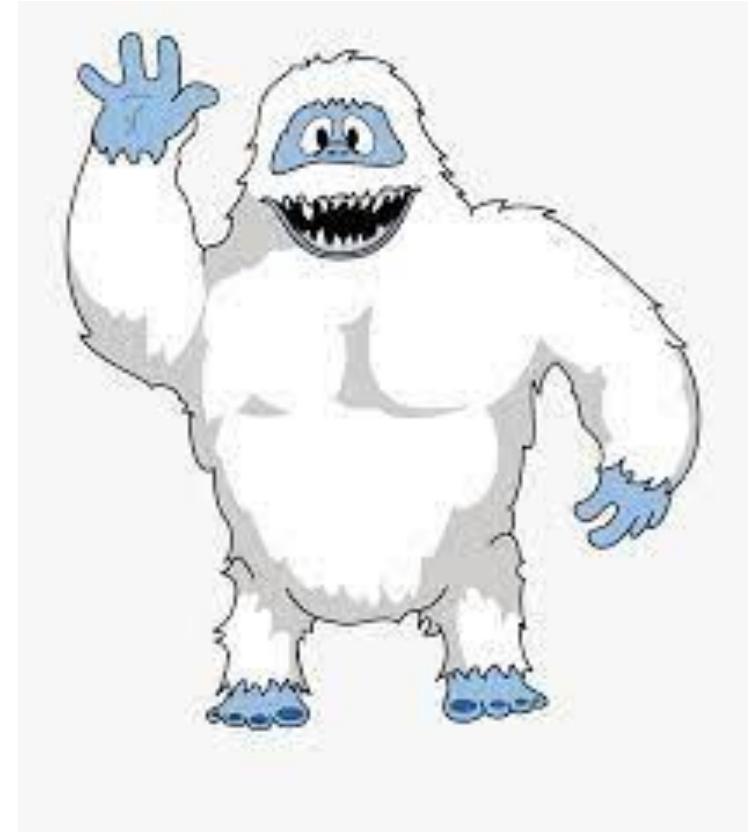
But what is leadership in children's social care?

- More than designated positions.
- Elusive ...

"The qualities that make a successful children's services leader aren't straightforward to define – but inspections show that they're very obvious when present – and strikingly so when they aren't."

(Eleanor Schooling, Ofsted, 2016)

- If the inspectorate don't know ... what can research tell us?

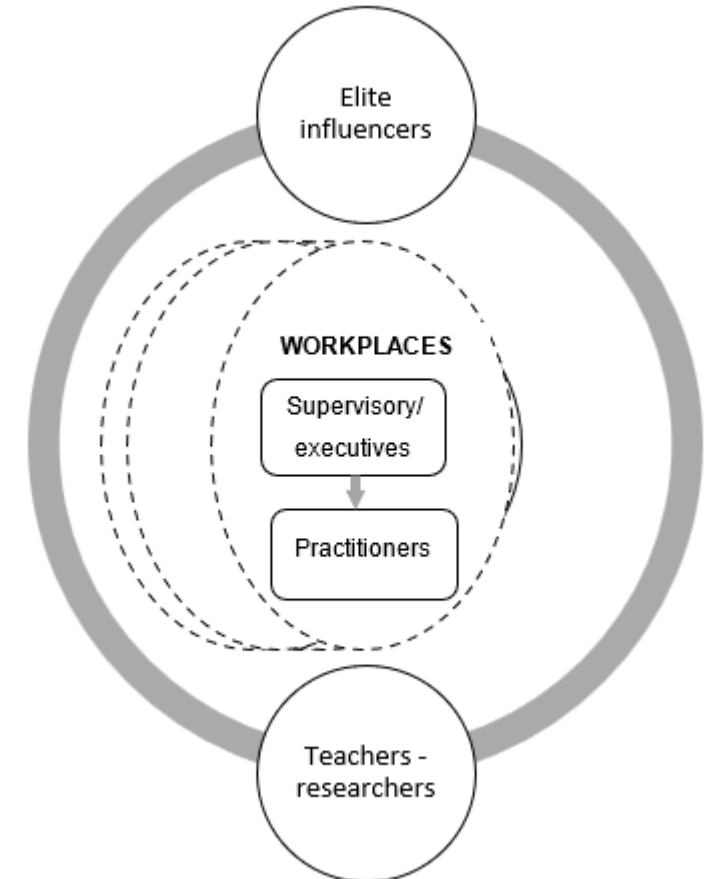


Review of leadership in child protection social work

- Review of policy and research since the post-war period.
- Overview of social work and management literatures.
- Research focused on leadership is very limited - mainly incidental findings from other studies.
- Evidence of three distinct approaches to leadership:
 1. Custodial management
 2. Managerialism
 3. 'Practice leadership'

Approach 1: Custodial management – prominent in 1970-80s

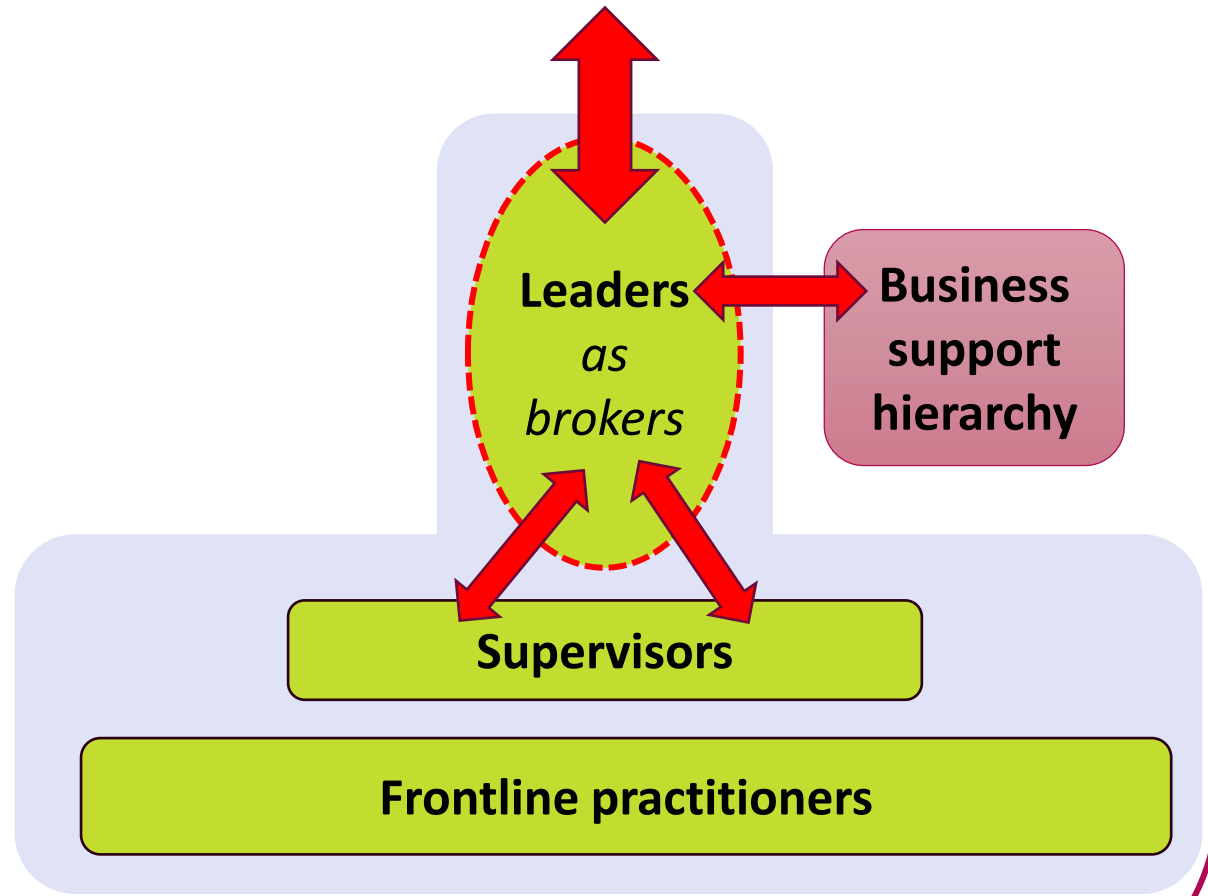
- Focus is on preserving the profession's 'customary' ways – in a professional bureaucracy.
- Professional members at all levels - enables a self-sustaining credential system.
- Even though the state has some control, social workers hold power over technical aspects of work.
- Poor visibility of practice aids practitioner discretion and gatekeeping of services.



The profession as a self-sustaining credential system (from Freidson, 1986)

What has worked well in custodial management?

- Although there is a risk of the executive being undermined (due to ‘indoctrination’, autonomy, discretion) ...
- Management and leadership serve two key roles:
 1. Managing internal ‘boundary’ disputes, e.g. case allocation, admin support.
 2. Acting as a buffer from the uncertainty of the outside world– *“I’ve got your back”*.



(Adapted from Mintzberg, 1979)

Approach 2: Managerialism – evident from late 1980s

- Marked increase in audit and other management control strategies.
- Labelled as the ‘New Public Management’ project (Hood, 1991).
- Key influences:
 - Economic crises of 1976 and 1980s.
 - Notable serious case reviews and inquiries.
 - Neoliberalism (Margaret Thatcher, 1979-90).

Managerialism in children's social care

RHETORIC

Standardise practice.
Focus on performance to enhance efficiency.
Create accountability.
“Total Quality Management”.

Management control strategies.
Oversight – ICS, supervision, audit, inspection.
Dilute professional power, e.g. matrix management.
Proceduralisation of practice.
Innovation thwarted due to standardisation and pre-set targets.

REALITY

Approach 3: 'Practice leadership' - emergence over last decade

- The answer to complex system challenges?



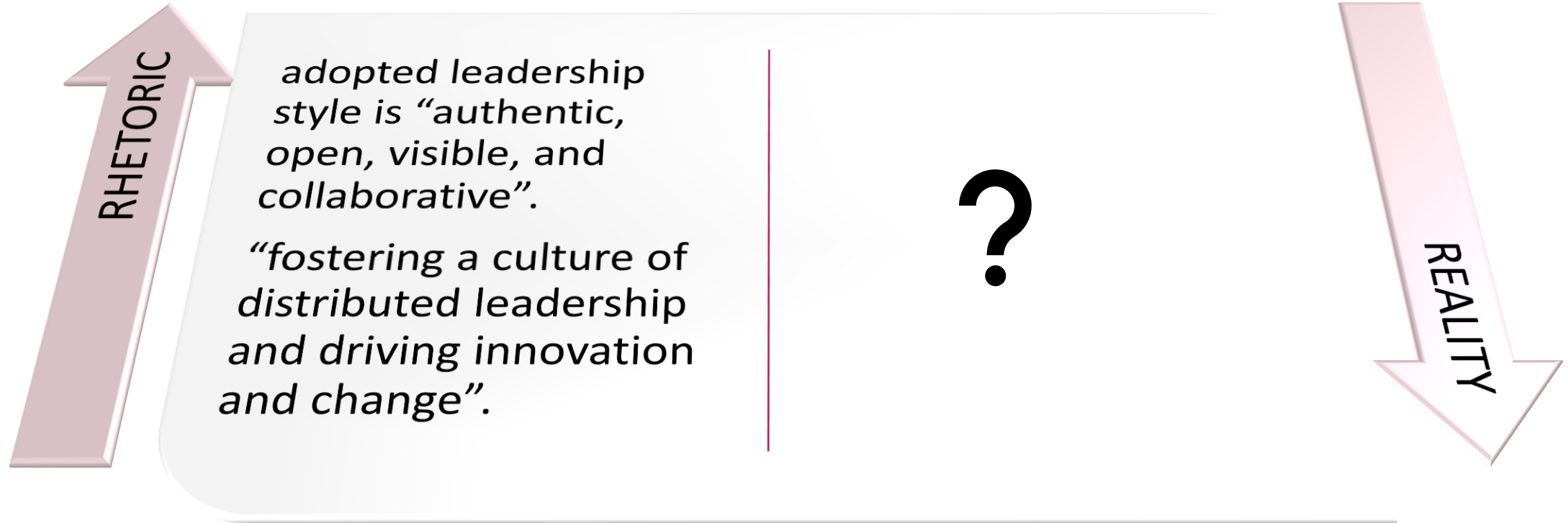
- The current leadership goal in the post-Munro, pro-innovation world?

'Practice leadership' – is it a thing?

- DFE Knowledge and Skills Statement for Practice Leaders introduced 2018
 1. Lead and govern excellent practice
 2. Creating a context for excellent practice
 3. Designing a system to support effective practice
 4. Developing excellent practitioners
 5. Support effective decision-making
 6. Quality assurance and improvement



'Practice leadership' in practice – work in progress



Evaluation report published by the DFE, July 2021, authored by Capaldi Consulting Ltd

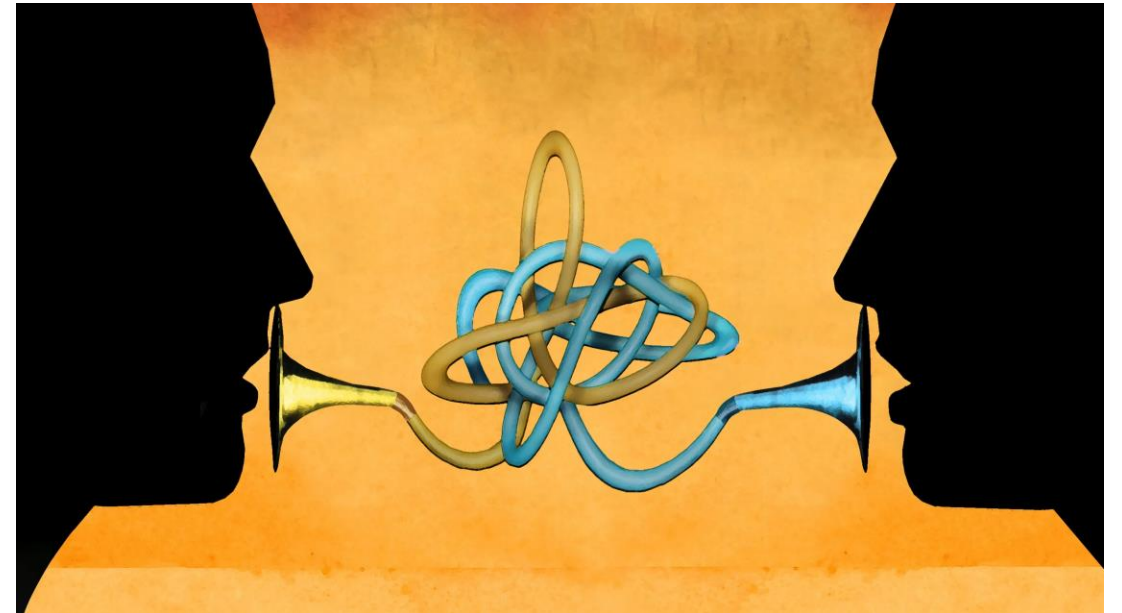
Distinct eras or different approaches?

- There seems to be agreement that leadership is:
 1. an activity undertaken by ‘accountable’ senior leaders – to instil values and direction at a local level; and
 2. essential for creating the right environment for good social work practice to flourish.
- But ... is performance management more important to drive efficiency and effectiveness through increased review of professional work?
- Or should leadership be curious, collaborative, keen to learn and innovate?
- **Is part of the problem that ‘practice leadership’ has been introduced without a clear cultural shift?**

Compliance eats ‘practice leadership’ for breakfast?

Final thoughts and research agenda

- Need more focus – in research and practice - on leadership.
- My current PhD study is seeking to observe “confident leadership” in a London LA.
- Clear policy could avoid mixed messages on leadership approach.





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