

AN EXAMINATION OF AUTHENTICITY AND POWER IN THREE IRISH PROFESSIONAL LEADERS DELIVERING ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

Irish professional leaders are delivering organisational change. Times of organisational change provide a fertile ground for the exercise of professional leadership; both tactical and strategic. This study of 3 professional leaders found that self-confidence, self-identification of authenticity and power are significant criteria in the professional leadership of successful organisational change. Implications for the academic body of knowledge and practise are discussed.

KEYWORDS: change management, organisational change, change leadership, professional leadership, authentic leadership, power, personal power, referent power, expert power

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“we’ll say that the bomb hit... They made sure that [it was done in the] last week before Christmas, they deleted files...”

– Aoife

“moving from a small projects organisation to a large projects organisation is a paradigm shift...”

– Brian

“the [organisation] was about to be closed by both Revenue and the Central Bank.”

– Cara

1. Introduction

Organisational change is an increasingly evident feature of the competitive and dynamic nature of organisational life (Petrou, Demerouti and Schaufeli, 2018). Kotter (1995) supports Arnold’s assessment that “even well-established change initiatives, for which a great deal of information, advice and assistance are available, are no guarantee of success” and that “the majority of change programmes appear to fail” (Arnold, 2005: 557). Kotter (1995) supports the proposition that times of organisational change provide a fertile ground for the exercise of professional leadership given entities are in a state of change and there is mission critical leader/follower interaction as “Change must be top-down to provide vision and

create structure, and bottom-up to encourage participation and generate support” (Moran and Brightman, 2000: 67). This is supported by the *Harvard Business Review* editorial which stated “Guiding change may be the ultimate test of a leader... leading change is both absolutely essential and incredibly difficult” (HBR, 2007: 2). Studies of professional leaders delivering organisational change are limited in number and no such study could be found in an Irish organisational setting (Kotter, 1995; HBR, 2007; Komariah and Kurniady, 2017; Gibson and Groom, 2019). This paper gathered a data corpus from 3 successful Irish professional leaders of intentionally different organisation types and examines the presence of authenticity and power in relation to their professional leadership of organisations in times of change.

2. Methodology

This research was conducted in part satisfaction of a professional leadership studies course in order to obtain a data corpse in respect of the experiences of professional leaders in Ireland. The research design and methods were pre-determined in the setting of the research task. The research was limited to interviewing 3 participants, each to be from different organisations and a thematic analysis was to be conducted on the transcripts to compare and contrast leadership theory studied with the professionals in practice, writing up 3 themes in a research article format.

Building upon the research constraints, a 10 question semi-structured 1 hour telephone interview format was devised. The questions were related to professional leadership and guided by relevant literature, principally Northouse (2016), but were broad in scope to allow the research participants share their own experiences and understanding of professional leadership. To maximise the participants willingness and comfort to engage in the research and thereafter in sharing information in respect of themselves, their professional practise and leadership experience a strict confidentiality agreement, promising

anonymity for themselves and their organisation was entered into.

The participants, as profiled in Table 1, were selected from a pool of candidates, all being professional leaders, interested in participating in the research. The 3 participants were chosen primarily as their organisation categories differed, secondarily, they were chosen over other candidates in their organisation categories, as their age profile was such to indicate that they had considerable workplace experience.

The interviews conducted resulted in a data corpus of 3 anonymised transcribed interviews. The 3 transcribed interviews were subjected to Braun and Clarke's (2006) flexible thematic analysis framework as expounded by Maguire and Delahunt (2017).

3. Findings

The presentation of the qualitative and quantitative findings are integrated to reveal both the numeric responses and quotes that exemplify how professional leadership is experienced by the participants. The findings begin by

Table 1. Research participant profiles

<i>Name</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Qualifications</i>	<i>Years in the Workforce</i>	<i>Years as a Professional Leader</i>	<i>Organisation Category</i>	<i>Professionally Responsible for Revenue</i>	<i>Professional Leader of Followers/People</i>	<i>Revenue per Follower</i>	<i>Responsible to</i>
Aoife	Ire	F	55-60	Undergraduate Honours Degree, Postgraduate Diploma	40-50	15-20	Health & Social Care Charity	€1.8M	130	€13,846	Board of Directors (10 People)
Brian	Ire	M	55-60	Undergraduate Honours Degree, Post Graduate Diplomas	30-40	30	Engineering and Construction	€20M	185	€108,108	Managing Director
Cara	Ire	F	55-60	Undergraduate Honours Degree, Post Graduate Diplomas, Masters Degree, Professional Qualifications	30-40	10-15	Financial Services	€1M	25	€40,000	Board of Directors (7 People)

presenting the 3 professional leadership themes the participants answers revealed, being: leadership of organisational change, authentic leadership, and leader power. Then, the paper provides a discussion based on the findings from the 3 themes in respect of: theme finding correlations and implications for practise and the understanding of professional leadership.

3.1. Leadership of Organisational Change

“Whether change is small scale or large scale, strategic or operational, people-centred or technology-focused, it needs to be planned and implemented effectively. ... Organisational change comes in many shapes, sizes and forms and, for this reason, it is not easy to establish an accurate picture of the degree of difficulty firms face in managing change successfully.”

Arnold (2005: 575–576)

The above quote and Kotter (1995) highlight the difficulties that arise from the broad concept of organisational change and in measuring its success. All 3 participants evidence recent experience as a professional leader successfully delivering positive change in their organisation.

Aoife: “we’ll say that the bomb hit...three years ago, ... the Chairperson and CEO left and started a company in direct competition with the organisation. ... they also emailed [all employees]. They made sure that [it was done in the] last week before Christmas, they deleted files...” her leadership motivation was that “we’re not just going to close the place go down, we’re going to fight for them.” In terms of the turnaround, she says “I’d say it’s only in the last year, I suppose that you can feel the effects of that. ... A difference that that I’ve made. But that was the biggest challenge ever.”

Brian: “over the last 6 years” he has been leading “developing the doubling of operations of [the organisation], from a 7 million turnover to a 23 million turnover. As well as the organisation in terms of professional capacity, and specifically, the breadth of services, and particularly in [a specific client market],” and “we have become, I suppose, a recognized provider of large projects, to the [a specific client market], within the European Theatre”.

Cara: “the [organisation] was about to be closed by both Revenue and the Central Bank,” and “in the first five years of my job as CEO, I turned that around to make us a now an example of good practise.”

Aoife and Cara spoke strongly about driving positive organisational change after their respective organisations

had been rocked by crisis where Brian spoke about driving organisational change in the absence of an underlying crises. The presence of a crisis is not required for organisational change to be necessary as Kotter (1995) and Arnold (2005) suggest that organisational change comes in many shapes, sizes and forms.

Although all 3 came to lead the organisational change in different circumstances it is clear that the change led by Brian and Cara was “planned change” (Arnold, 2005: 582) in that their leadership of the organisational change was strategic and conceived above them within their organisations. Where Aoife’s experience was of “forced change” (Arnold, 2005: 582) whereby organisational change was the only option in lieu of organisational failure and so was not strategically driven. This is reinforced by Brian and Cara speaking of “strategy” in order to deliver the organisational change where Aoife did not. Strategy is an important aspect of professional leadership (Kotter, 1995; Cannella, Finkelstein and Hambrick, 2008) and is consistent with Arnold’s (2005) understanding that organisational change needs to be planned and implemented effectively. Aoife and her organisation did not appear to have the time to prepare a strategy for the change and as the professional leadership was fast moving on the ground such that “there was people there till three or four in the morning for the whole of Christmas, nobody got Christmas that that year” (Aoife) it can be considered “tactical” professional leadership which, although not ideal, is a concept supported by Twohig and Tremble (1991: 38) whereby “effective leaders were described as having made decisions to improve their unit’s immediate situation”.

Brian and Cara evidenced revenue/profit growth “7 million turnover to a 23 million turnover” (Brian) and “started to turn a profit then or a surplus in our case” (Cara) as flowing from the organisational change, where Aoife did not mention revenue or profit and that maybe because of the organisation type that Aoife leads, unlike the other 2, is not commercial but charitable and predominantly State funded. This is supported by Kotter (1995) and Arnold (2005) who suggest that organisational change may have many organisation specific desirable outcomes, including “turnaround” or the organisation not failing in the case of Aoife.

All 3 participants spoke of people and their followers as key components to deliver the organisational change with Brian highlighting “an investment in people needed too” consistent with Moran and Brightman (2000: 66) who state, “Managing change is about managing people”. The

interaction from professional leader to their followers in each case was generally positive “It took communication, it took positivity in saying that we can do this” (Aoife) “able to understand the new style” (Cara), empowering “it was a jigsaw puzzle where it took teamwork” (Aoife) “creating sort of a spirit of growth and, and individual ownership” (Brian) and motivating “if you can get all people working together and independently put together, I think you can achieve anything” (Aoife) “tell them what is going on in the business, how successful we are, and sharing those successes” (Brian) and all of this is consistent with the leaders followers being “pulled” along a course by their sense of purpose, desire, value (Moran and Brightman, 2000). Conversely, Aoife, Brian and Cara also highlight that people can sometimes be obstacles to positive organisational change and in their professional leader roles they had to manage these people by means including, supervision “help them in the area that they may be deficient in to improve” (Aoife), reassigning them “help them get into the direction, what is their passion as well as what they like to do” (Aoife), mentoring them “demonstrated to them in a mentoring capacity” (Brian) or exiting them “get rid of and remove and move on people” (Cara) and this is consistent with change that violates a follower’s sense of purpose will be “resisted” (Moran and Brightman, 2000).

3.2. Authentic Leadership

“Authentic leadership represents one of the newest areas of leadership research. It focuses on whether leadership is genuine and ‘real.’ As the title of this approach implies, authentic leadership is about the authenticity of leaders and their leadership.”

Northouse (2016: 195)

Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing and Peterson (2008) conducted a comprehensive review of the literature and identified four authentic leadership components: self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency. All 3 participants evidenced authentic professional leadership in their organisational change journey. Key to this authentic professional leadership categorisation is that all 3 participants strongly indicated that they were the same person while acting in the professional leadership role and outside of their work lives “I think if you stay yourself, and I do believe you have to be yourself the way you think authentic” (Aoife) “Leadership style is probably based on my exponential life experience, you know, which results are driven and my personality” (Brian) “my leadership, and my, my personal would be very, very alike” (Cara) and this is consistent

with Northouse’s (2016: 196) definition of authentic leadership as it is based on their life experience, and the meaning they attach to those experiences such that there is no managerial artifice applied to perform in their professional leadership role and that they lead from conviction, and are originals, not copies of a fashionable leadership style (Duignan and Bhindi 1997; Shamir and Eilam 2005).

Eagly (2005) considers authentic leadership as relational, created by leaders and followers together. That it results not from the leader’s efforts alone, but also from the response of followers. All 3 participants evidenced this in their professional leadership of the organisational change: “it was a jigsaw puzzle where it took teamwork” (Aoife) “Developing them to take more responsibility for their work and have the confidence to deliver bigger projects” (Brian) “then I lead my staff into doing it. So I motivate them. And I challenge them and I direct them into doing whatever it is... And then how I can help them do the best job they can do” (Cara). In essence this criterion is proven as not one of the participants take full responsibility for the success of the positive organisational change and instead share that accolade with their followers who delivered on foot of the participants leadership.

Luthans and Avolio (2003) and Avolio and Gardner (2005) suggest that the positive attributes of Confidence, Hope, Optimism and Resilience predispose or enhance a leader’s capacity to develop the components of authentic leadership. Confidence, Hope and Optimism were evidenced in the responses of all 3 participants in respect of their leadership, followers, and organisation. Aoife and Cara evidenced Resilience on account of the difficulties experienced during the organisational change, primarily on account of the crisis the organisation was in at the time of their professional leadership within the organisation beginning, Brian did not evidence resilience, or a lack thereof, probably on account of his organisation being functional but not growing adequately at the time of his organisational change journey beginning.

Of the 3 participants Aoife most strongly self-identified her professional leadership style where she states of her follower’s belief that “I’m authentic, and somebody they can trust. Because if I’m not being authentic people know, pretty quick. You’re not stupid, you know, you have to be authentic.” And in respect of the Board, she believes “that I’m authentic, and that they can trust me, and that the information I give is accurate, reliable, and verifiable. That’s the important thing.” “No, I think if you stay yourself, and I do believe you have to be yourself, the way you think

authentic...” Aoife goes on to explain the development of her authentic style of leadership as it was “5 years” into her practise as a professional leader where she “would be very low confident... I was shy” and “used to adapt ... trying to copy and be learning from people” “And my personality wouldn’t have come out. Now, I’m not afraid to let it out.” and “The funny thing is once I once I got into the authentic, I found that I, my career, increased, you know, I kept on being promoted constantly.” Aoife’s experience of coming to and practising authentic leadership is consistent with the Luthans and Avolio (2003) mention of Confidence as one of the positive attributes that predispose or enhance a leader’s capacity to develop the components of authentic leadership (Northouse, 2016: 203–204). Brian similarly states “So I will, you know, make decisions, you know, after consideration, definitively, and reasonably quickly. And so I wouldn’t be mulling over situations, so I can make decisions quickly.” and Cara agrees “I believe that I am very single minded in what I have to do. So in work, I lead from the front” such that all 3 agree self-confidence is a foundational element to their practise of authentic leadership. It is of note that this self-confidence criterion has been repeatedly found in “Studies of Leadership Traits and Characteristics” as far back as 1948 (Northouse, 2016: 22).

Although each participant evidenced being an authentic professional leader each has their own version of what an authentic professional leader is and there are no homogeneous criteria identified, other than being oneself while leading and exercising self-confidence. This may be because of the differing nature of the participants and their organisations or because authentic professional leadership is rooted in the individual and the shedding of managerial artifice allows a professional leader focus less on self and more on the organisation’s opportunities and threats (Duignan and Bhindi, 1997; George, 2003).

3.3. Leader Power

“The concept of power is related to leadership because it is part of the influence process. Power is the capacity or potential to influence. People have power when they have the ability to affect others’ beliefs, attitudes, and courses of action.”

Northouse (2016: 10)

All 3 participants evidenced the use of power as professional leaders during the organisational change journey. The Six Bases of Power are: Legitimate, Referent, Reward, Expert, Coercive and Information (Northouse, 2016: 10–11).

Aoife evidenced the employment of the “Personal Power” (Northouse, 2016: 11) of “Referent Power” being “Based on followers’ identification and liking for the leader. A teacher who is adored by students has referent power” (Northouse, 2016: 10). The Northouse example of an adored teacher is particularly apt for Aoife as she evidences natural facilitation of “communication”, peer learning among followers, seeks “feedback”, establishes positive “habits” for her followers and cares for her followers. Aoife reports that this approach “has made a huge difference in all departments, and in communication also. ... I think if you can get all people working together and independently put together, I think you can achieve anything.” This use of Personal Referent Power is arguably the reason why she was able to get her followers to deliver the positive organisational change which was taken on at a time of imminent organisational failure.

Brian evidenced the employment of Personal Power in the forms of Referent Power and Expert Power. The Referent Power was in a less express manner than that of Aoife but is evidenced by “mentoring” of weaker followers, “being a supportive leader, and not a details person”, providing “the leadership support needed in a crisis”, and “to give them the encouragement and the support, you know, so they can be successful”. The “Expert Power” being “Based on followers’ perceptions of the leader’s competence. A tour guide who is knowledgeable about a foreign country has expert power” (Northouse, 2016: 10). The Northouse example of a tour guide is apt for Brian as the perception is that he has been through similar organisational change before and undoubtedly has considerable professional leadership experience surpassing that of the organisation and followers he leads as he states, regardless of the specific regulatory environment “it doesn’t make any difference to my leadership style or what the leadership is about, you know, is about getting people to perform, you know, optimally and to create an environment of positivity within the office and to produce good, a good product, you know, which is good engineering product, and then if it moves to construction, you know, provide good construction administration and achieve scheduled budgets, you know, to certain quality. So, making sure that, the relationship I provide, but also, very importantly, the leadership provided by my direct reports, and to the teams that they manage.” The evidenced Expert Power appears to be both in respect of professional leadership and the engineering/construction field, and this joint expertise undoubtedly feeds into the successful use of Referent Power with his followers. Brian sums up his use of his Referent and Expert Power together nicely when he said, “So in terms of an animal world

analogy, I'd probably be, a sweeping bird, sweeping eagle who comes in, does a review and then fly's off and that would very much be the approach."

Cara, of the 3 participants, most strongly evidenced the employment of the Personal Power of Expert Power as she stated: "I cleaned up the books" and "looked at the staff and decided who should be kept who should be gone" "And some of our board members of the 13 couldn't understand or wouldn't, and they couldn't or wouldn't change or adapt to the new way of doing things. So what I had to... get rid of and remove and move on people who basically had no knowledge or didn't want to learn" "I understood how regulated entities work, whereas my Board didn't" "I build the strategy and presented it to the Board" "the people within my organisation, my followers, would say that I'm extremely professional. I am highly qualified. I have learned everything that needs to be learned to do the job properly... I lead from the front." It is of note that this expert power was applied to both her followers and her Board, the entity she reports to, in order to achieve their compliance with her financial services field expertise.

In all 3 participants the personal powers deployed is reflective of the leader's authentic leadership style throughout the organisational change process they led and there is no evidence of any participant using "Position Power" (Northouse, 2016: 11) to deliver the organisational change.

4. Discussion

There is a strong correlation, in the transcripts, between the participants self-confidence and their practise as authentic professional leaders. There is an evidenced theoretical correlation between the participants employment of an authentic professional leadership approach and their leadership of positive organisational change. There is an evidenced theoretical correlation between the participants

use of personal power, and absence of the use of position power, as professional leaders and their leadership of positive organisational change. There is strong evidence, in the transcripts, that the power exerted by each leader correlates with their own self-identification including as an authentic professional leader.

There is an arguable position to be made from an analysis of the evidence that in order to give positive organisational change its best chance of success the professional leader charged with strategic and tactical delivery needs to have confidence in their own authentic self, such that they can employ their personal power to have their followers deliver the organisational change. This position is not readily found in the literature, nor is a contradictory position found and therefore this position can be said to add to the body of academic knowledge. In respect of the implications for professional leadership practise, leaning into one's own self-identity and employing the best of that as personal power is a beneficial professional leadership approach in driving positive organisational change.

5. Conclusion

The literature and participants responses indicate that self-confidence is an important consideration in the analysis of professional leadership. Self-confidence can lead to self-identified use of an authentic leadership approach. An authentic leadership approach allows the leader focus on the strategic and tactical opportunities and threats facing their organisation, instead of maintaining a managerial artifice. Self-confidence together with an authentic leadership approach empowers professional leaders to employ personal power to drive the organisation in respect of responding to strategic and tactical opportunities and threats. Self-confidence together with an authentic leadership approach and the ability to employ personal power gives positive organisational change its best chance of success.

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