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Clore Leadership-AHRC Online Research Library Paper

What Are the Synergies Between the Experience of Disability and Effective Leadership?

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AHRC Research Project:

‘What are the synergies between the experience of disability and effective leadership?’

Motivation:-

This research paper is an attempt to distil and articulate the connections and synergies between the experience and embodiment of disability, and the characteristics and competencies found in effective leadership. Over the past 18-months, I have reflected upon my experiences, work and aspirations through the lens of leadership, and been surprised to the degree in which elements of leadership were, implicitly and explicitly, part of my lived and daily experience as disabled person. In order to negotiate, make sense of, and make our way in the world around us, disabled people inevitably utilise traits of leadership, albeit in the main, unconsciously. Examples range from the organisational skills required in employing a team of support workers, negotiating medical or social sectors, training a guide-dog, ensuring access needs are met and finding solutions to a whole host of barriers are part of the day-to-day operations of disabled people. These management, planning and leadership activities, are often underpinned by highly developed social awareness and political consciousness, born out of the experience of inequality, misrepresentation and marginalisation. Activism, for example, is leadership and central to the lives of many disabled people, as they seek to redress balances and, fundamentally, change the world in which we operate. So my research is motivated by a desire to found out the extent to which the traits, skill and values developed through the experience of disability are, and can be applied to the principles and practice of leadership.

Outcome:-

By articulating and valuing these embodied constituents, I hope too reframe the relationships between leadership and disability, and begin address the chronic under-representation of disabled people in leadership roles. Whilst disabled people constitute 18.6% of the working-age population, only 4% of Board Members, and 5% of Chief Executives of public-funded arts organisations were disabled (Arts Council’s 2011 Arts Council RFO submissions). Clearly, legislature, strategic interventions and diversity agendas have had limited impact on the numbers of disabled people breaking through the higher echelons in the Arts. ‘Sticks’ are necessary in focusing minds and highlighting sectorial barriers and discrimination, but fundamental shifts require engagement with, and appreciation of the ‘carrots’ offered by disabled people. By focussing upon the skill-sets, innovative approaches and breadths of perspectives, we can highlight a pool of untapped potential and leaders and imbue confidence amongst disabled people around their own leadership resources. Alice Maynard, Chair of Scope, notes that the recruitment of disabled people is rarely based on merit, the determinant by which non-disabled counterparts are employed, but rather a whole host of other considerations which are beyond our control,

including access issues, attitudinal prejudice and lack of conventional career paths. This explains the under-representation of disabled people at all levels in the workforce. By making the case for embodied competences and transferable skills of disabled people, the frame of meritocracy will be harder to ignore.

The Arts and culture could, and should be at the forefront of this reframing, shifting the rhetoric of creativity, diversity, engagement and representation to a reality in which disabled leaders are disturbing, influencing and re-invigorating the sector. Additionally, the lifeblood of a vibrant Arts sector should revolve around new perspectives, stories and aesthetics so those traditionally ignored, unheard and marginalised should be in the 'box-seat' to deliver.

Methodology:-

My own experiences as a disabled person in general, and working in the Arts in particular, has provided the framework for this research project. Through the Clore Fellowship, my understanding of leadership, and myself as a leader was developed, and the relationship between my own experience of disability and leadership became apparent. For example, having a differing speech pattern necessitates economy and clarity of communication, which resonated unexpectedly when leaders spoke of developing communication strategies, editing and presenting themselves. I had unbeknown to myself, embodied methods of communication which others related to effective leadership. Similarly, the values expounded by Jude Kelly, during my secondment at the Southbank, around social justice and equality resonated deeply with my experiences, and perceptions as a disabled person. My embodied and political experiences as a disabled person, linked to the competences and values displayed by the leaders I admired. Through secondments, workshops and discussions, the connections between disability and leadership became increasingly tangible, part of my day-to-day existence, and leadership became a way of being, rather than a formalised or structured role.

Beyond my own experience, my immediate network of disabled colleagues and acquaintances provided testimony and anecdotes around their own experiences, and ways in which disability had influenced their work and leadership style. This set of relationships is predominantly within the arts and cultural sectors, as this has been my area of work over the last 25 years. I also conducted a series of interviews and case studies with disabled leaders from the arts, social, journalistic and political fields, thereby gathering a broader range of perspectives. I was particularly interested in the universalities that could be drawn out, and specifically how the experience of disability can inform and infuse leadership understanding across the sectors.

The wealth of academic and material to be found in Disability Study Literature were critical in framing experience, testimony and case studies. The work of disabled writers and thinkers such as Tom Shakespeare, Colin Barnes and Colette Conroy, provided invaluable overviews of theory and the development of disability studies.

Dissemination:-

Aside from this paper to be submitted to Clore, I am intent on writing a series on related articles in various publications including Guardian Professional, Disability Now and Research in Drama Education (RiDE). I have already publicised the work on a Disability Now podcast, and will be returning once this phase of research is completed. The work will also be disseminated through my own website and networks, including the case studies I have interviewed.

This paper will be a springboard for further detailed and consolidated research, and my collaboration with academic Colette Conroy, and the University of Hull will continue. The research has provided the basis for workshops and seminars I have run at the University, and I am keen too, and pursuing ways of developing the work.

Models of Disability:-

The models constructed around disability are useful insofar as they provide the political, economic and social contexts in which disabled people exist and experience. They are used by both, disabled and non-disabled people make sense of their respective places in the world. According to Rod Michalko, disability teaches us much about society, and as such disability is a 'political act' for both disabled and non-disabled people ('The Difference That Disability Makes', 2002).

The Medical Model posits that disability should be prevented, cured or compensated, and is inextricably linked to pain, suffering and tragedy. Disability is "the antidote of what we aspire too" and a precursor to disintegration and death (Michalko). Disability is a problem, at odds with concepts of normalcy or society, and disabled peoples placed outside the comfort zones others inhabit; disability becomes metaphor, and disabled people caricatured and dehumanised.

Against, this backdrop, we have to make sense of our role in wider society, and unsurprisingly the identities which are foisted upon us have a whole host of damaging practical, psychological and political implications; "we are lives and bodies gone wrong." (Michalko). Tom Shakespeare, the sociologist puts this another way by suggesting, "disability which is the most active and prominent metaphor of all, and disabled people become ciphers for those feelings, processes or characteristics with which non-disabled society cannot deal" ('Cultural Representation of Disabled People, 1994). In this context, any sense of entitlement or empowerment of disabled people as citizens, let alone leaders, is impossible.

The Social Model saw disabled people reclaim their identity, and create a framework in which to understand, embody and celebrate their identity. Disability was externalised rather than internalised, and understood in terms of lived experience rather than flawed make up. This 'lived experience' was largely predicated on collective oppression and marginalisation, and existing in a world which 'disables us'. Confronting and overcoming these barriers are embodied challenges we face on a daily basis. We may not imbue these challenges with grandiose claims, but the competences required to negotiate the world around us, undoubtedly touch upon the cornerstones of effective leadership. Simon Startin (actor/director) pinpoints the

experience of bullying due to his disability as causal in his subsequent value-system, and journey into activism, and leadership.

The Social Model of disability is invaluable in establishing a political and social contexts for the collective experiences and narratives of disabled people, and provides a framework for understanding discrimination, inequality and marginalisation, The strength of the disability movement is built upon this collective understanding of a 'disabling world'.

Personal narratives and embodiments have tended to be side-lined for fear of weakening the political traction of a collective disability movement. However, given the context of this research, the case studies I interviewed, were surprisingly keen too, and candid in reflecting upon their own individual experiences of impairment, and the ways in which these contribute too, rather than contradict a political and collective consciousness.

I believe, both, the personal and collective experience of disability, provide insights into leadership, and my case studies and research have highlighted the importance of recognizing each in the context of leadership.

Leadership Characteristics:

Resilience:-

Resilience is widely recognised as a key component of leadership, and indeed, Clore is currently delivering a Resilient Leadership Programme for the Arts Council. Resilience was a recurring theme of the personal and professional journeys of all the case studies, and associated to, both, experiences of disability and leadership. Resilience comes from a variety of places; the impairment itself, the act of leadership and the worlds in which the case studies operate. Obviously all are related, and many aspects of resilience relate to disabled and non-disabled leaders equally. However, the identity and experience of disability does engender specific paths to, and forms of resilience.

Simon Startin commented that, 'resilience comes from beliefs and beliefs come from your experience'. His resilience was born out of a combination of disability-related factors including being bullied at school, being barred from drama colleges, bouts of medicalization and prevailing discrimination within the Arts. All these have been drivers in politicisation, activism and leadership, and underpin his determination to place disabled people centre-stage, create a radical aesthetic and ensure different stories are told and voices heard. Simon's leadership values, aspirations and style have been shaped by the resilience required in pursuing paths from which disabled people have traditionally been excluded.

Mandi Redver-Rowe talked of 'an anger she never knew she had' upon becoming blind. Following a transitory period of 'grieving' the loss of sight, the anger arose from the realisation of how disabled people were treated, and her 'identity-crossing' to a marginalised, and disempowered minority. Her impairment could be adjusted too, and indeed she soon 'embraced' new ways of thinking and operating. However

the ways in which she was stigmatised, perceived, treated differently and cast as a victim of misfortune fuelled her anger at injustice and inequality. Michalko argues that, adjustment to disability is couched in terms of 'doing the best you can with the little you've got' in the non-disabled world. However, Redver-Rowe contextualises her exclusion from society and associated norms with which she was familiar preceding blindness, as placing a 'fire in her belly', bringing a wide range of different skill-sets and sensibilities to her make-up and energising a determination to lead and challenge the structures and ideologies which had served her so badly.

Marie Pye, a Councillor spoke of the importance in recognizing the value of disabled people's day-to-day experience, which is necessarily underpinned by 'strength and resilience'. Chronic pain and exhaustion were highlighted by the Director, Ewan Marshall, and the management of these whilst still carrying out work and leadership roles, involved meticulous construction of daily tasks, willingness and ability to delegate, understanding and management of risk and sensitivity towards teams.

All these testimonies offer insights into the resilience required in functioning with impairments, but more importantly resilience required in overcoming structures and ideologies which demote and demean the identity of disability. So, resilience is inherent to the experience of disability, and leadership theories expound the virtues of resilience.

Sense of purpose:-

Sense of purpose is inherent to effective leadership. Single-mindedness, resolve and tenacity are vital components in motivating people to understand, buy-in and follow your vision. The experience of disability fed into the sense of purpose of all the case studies, to a greater or less degree.

Marie Pye spoke of the transiency and unpredictability of impairments, and the ways in which this focussed the mind, and led to an urgency in 'getting things done'. Fluctuating levels of pain, mobility and energy necessitated effective prioritisation and time management. Her experiences in managing disability and pain, were also particularly useful in contextualising the 'rough and tumble' of politics. After spending six months organising her life and work from a bed and subsequent bouts of severe pain, the rigours of the town hall appeared far less daunting. Disability had ensured that the 'wheat and chaff' were separated, and her leadership was unencumbered by incidentals. This focus, and sense of purpose was common to all case studies, sometimes related to disability, sometimes not, and is clearly a vital component to effective leadership.

Pye also spoke of, having had to take a year out, upon the onset of disability, during which she had time to 'take stock', work out what was important and ways of recalibrating her work. She also came to understand how her skills and competences could transfer across to new settings and opportunities. Many mentioned the importance of time management, in response to exhaustion, degenerative conditions or, simply, carrying out certain tasks. For instance, Alice

Manyard mentioned the time and energy negotiating London on a partially accessible transport network, and the additional planning and prioritisation incurred around getting around and ensuring meetings were productive. Ian MacRae, spoke of being a newsreader, and the ways in which the absence of time to Braille content, ensured scripting focussed upon the crux of the story with peripherals necessarily edited out.

Breaking rules, norms and conventions:-

The experience of disability often necessitates differences of approach, action and understanding – ‘doing things differently’. The disabled artist and activist, Liz Crow, cannot adhere to rules and conventions even if she wanted to. The changing nature of her impairment, in terms of pain and energy, prevent many of the interactions, activities and practices that play a vital role in conventional progression routes; networking, travelling and becoming part of the ‘club’. She, therefore, embodies a freedom, away traditional constraints and methodologies, reflected in her work which sets out to disturb and challenge the status quo. As such, Crow has developed a unique body of work and leadership style predicated upon the absence of norms and, in her words, “life has been complicated by impairment, but has become vastly more interesting”. Liz’s appearance on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, dressed as a Nazi as part of her Resistance body of work, drawing attention to the hidden histories and treatments of disabled people, was a typical example of her artistic and leadership interventions. ‘Going against the grain’ (Ewan Marshall), and bending of breaking rules and convention is where creativity and innovation flourish, and disability often necessitates innovation. Tony Heaton, Chief Executive of Shape, alluded to ‘seat of your pants’ leadership, ‘making it up as you go along’. In the absence of traditional career opportunities and progression for disabled people, this reactive and instinctive leadership style is somewhat inevitable, and in the main, effective.

Authenticity:-

The disturbance of convention can also underpin authenticity, as individual, rather than collective notions of what a leader should look like gain traction. Much has been written around authenticity in leadership, particular at this time of the ‘crisis of legitimacy’ facing the cultural system (‘Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy, John Holden, 2006). Conventional ways of funding, leading and delivering cultural have been found to be wanting, with associated hierarchies and hegemonies no longer fit for purpose. The traditional relationships between, and values shared by the public, politician and professionals are no longer ‘legitimised’, and new approaches to, and reconfiguration of leadership required. Mitchie and Gooty (2005) assert self-transcendent values such as social justice, equality and broadmindedness as central to authentic leadership, all characteristics underpinning the case studies, and due largely to the experience of disability.

Many disabled people and leaders have no choice but to be authentic, try as they might to assimilate the 'mainstream'.

Expertise:-

Simon Startin asserts that, "expertise underpins disability", and by necessity we become experts in a wide range of 'weird and wonderful' topics. In order to negotiate the multiplicity of barriers in the world around us, and we develop and embody unique skill-sets and understandings. Mandi Redvers-Rowe pinpoints the importance of planning and organisation as a blind person, and has become adept at mind-mapping, due consideration, thinking through and ahead, assessing and finding strategies to deal with all possible eventualities and solutions. These are predominantly solution-focussed, and can often be transferred to the context of leadership.

Proving Yourself:-

Leadership can be an exercise in proving yourself, often carried out against the backdrop of self-doubt and scepticism of others. Ewan Marshall, former Director of Graeae Theatre Company, says 'being taken seriously' was a big issue during his early days with the company, and now Graeae as a major player in theatre ecology in the UK and beyond. This journey from the shadows is testament to the commitment and leadership of those associated with the company. When Ewan moved on to the Dukes Theatre in Lancaster, there was a fear in some quarters that the 'building may be filled with disabled people', which suggests a residual reticence to disabled people on stage, or in positions of leadership. Tony Heaton spoke of the need to 'do more to convince people who you are, and what you are good at'. This tends to be a lifelong struggle for disabled people as preconceptions and stereotypes require continual challenging.

Mandi Redver-Rowe alluded to the way in which mistakes at work, and in leadership were conveniently blamed on the disability rather than individual, and framed as self-fulfilling prophecies, perpetuating reticence around employing disabled people. This placed greater onus on the individual not to make mistakes, manage and exceed expectations, demonstrate your worth and meticulous organisation. These are all aspects of leadership which appear to be embodied by disabled people, whether or not, they are in roles of leadership.

'Different ways of doing and understanding things':-

As a blind parent, Ian MacRae spoke of the embodiment of imagination when telling stories to his children, in the absence of Braille texts. Similarly, when producing the arts programme 'In Focus' for radio, Ian had to ensure artists articulated their work in accessible and descriptive ways. This process of aligning language with imagery

brought new ways of understanding and interpreting work, adding value to the content of the programme.

The academic, Albert Robillard, maintains that his inability to speak due to paralysis has allowed him to observe the subtle workings of conversations and interactions. Paralysis has 'born gifts' which include patience, focus and the resultant increased productivity. There may indeed be embodied feelings of loss associated with acquired disability, but commonly readjustment, brings about increased self- and societal-awareness.

Community:-

Some case studies have chosen to work amongst disabled people, others not and most had worked across sectors. There were some interesting reflections, and learning outcomes. Those engaged with the disabled community, or disability issues tended to be focussed on bringing about change, implying an explicit leadership role; creating opportunities in the Arts, broadening representation in the media or advocating in the social sectors. All assumed a political consciousness, and set of deeply held ideas and values. The way in which these organisations function, and the motivations of the individuals within them, can offer important leadership lessons beyond 'the industry of disability'.

Marie Pye spoke of the relief of working amongst disabled people, because of their inherent understanding of different ways of working. Working with like-minded people, who understand the barriers faced by disabled people, led to a sense of empowerment. Flexibility and diversity are 'normalised', and established as key components in maximising outputs. Current leadership theories, in particular work around cognitive diversity, recognizes the value bringing together different needs, perceptions and skills, as a means of increasing output, innovation and satisfaction.

Assertiveness:-

In order to counter disempowerment or marginalisation, disabled people and leaders have to develop assertiveness in all kinds of different ways; ensuring needs are met, negotiating bureaucracy or, simply, ensuring voices are heard. Marie Pye maintains that, 'assertiveness becomes second nature to disabled people', and this embodiment is undoubtedly a valuable leadership tool.

Conclusion:-

By making a case for the competences and value-systems gained through the experience of disability, and articulated by disabled leaders, we can begin to understand what we have to offer, and the ways in which these transferable skills and insights may be applied to leadership. In doing so, disabled people may gain the

confidence to pursue leadership roles, and there may be a broader understanding of the value disabled people can bring to organisations and the instigation of change.

Case Studies:-

Liz Crow	- Artist/Activist	- Chief Executive, Roaring Girl Productions
Ian MacRae	- Journalist	- Editor, Disability Now Magazine.
Tony Heaton	- Artist	- Chief Executive, Shape
Alice Maynard	- Consultant	- Chair of the Board, Scope.
Simon Startin	- Artist	- Director, Big Lounge Collective
Mandi Redver-Rowe	- Producer	- Creative Producer, Collective Encounters
Ewan Marshall	- Producer	- Producer, BBC.
Maria Pye	- Politician	- Labour Councillor, Waltham Abbey

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