

Leadership as purpose: Exploring the role of purpose in leadership practice

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Abstract

This article initiates a long overdue discussion regarding purpose within leadership, an integral yet often taken-for-granted and subsumed function of leadership. Specifically, the article problematizes the manifestation of purpose in everyday organizational leadership practices through the work of the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. The article argues that purpose requires greater attention if it is to become manifest in both the corporate and the societal orientations of leaders in organizations. In support of this argument we identify the implications of singularly focusing upon corporate purpose to the exclusion of societal purpose against the backdrop of the credit crunch aftermath. The article develops a theoretical argument that, when conceptualized as a process of sensemaking, leadership can provide an opportunity for notions of societal purpose to come to the fore in countervailing balance with corporate purposes. We conclude by suggesting a research agenda centred on further explicating and developing the idea of leadership as purpose.

Keywords

CSR, ethics, internal and external goods, leadership, purpose, sensemaking

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Introduction

In this article we wish to tackle and problematize the notion of 'Purpose'. It is our experience that purpose is so fundamentally tied up with leadership that it is almost invariably subsumed and taken for granted by leadership scholars. The seemingly axiomatic nature of purpose within leadership is the focus of our examination. In particular, we explore the manifestation of purpose within everyday leadership practice. We are seeking to extricate purpose from its taken-for-granted, implied state and foreground it for critical examination. In particular, we wish to explore and develop potential tensions and disjuncture between corporate and social notions of purpose. Building from this critique, we establish a conceptual framework and outline a research agenda that will foreground the role of purpose within leadership studies.

Many commentators (e.g. Bass, 1990; Hunt and Conger, 1999) argue that leadership is entwined with notions of vision, mission, shared goals, objectives and plans. Such notions emphasise the importance of leadership oriented towards enabling the achievement of something significant. In a sense they are all in some way implicitly associated with *purpose*. But are vision, mission, objectives and goals the same as purpose? Or does purpose imply a meta level meaning to a task – something of social value. Do social purposes have a role to play in leader-led relationships within the context of organizational life? Indeed, is it axiomatic that purpose is abundant in organizations or is the nature of organization and management seeking to divert discourses away from societal purpose?

We argue here that there has been too little discussion on the nature of purpose and its relationship with leadership in organizations within leadership studies. This omission has profound implications for practising leaders. For example, an examination of purpose and leadership can be seen to readily align with current debates in the context of the global 'credit crunch' on the role and practice of leadership within the banking institutions (Cooper, 2008; Krugman, 2008; Morris, 2008). We suggest that such debates would be enriched by extending the debate through examining purpose. Beyond leadership studies there has been considerable attention to notions of purpose with business ethics and social responsibility but this has not been framed as a leadership problem (Basu and Palazzo, 2008).

In *Leadership: Limits and Possibilities*, Grint (2005) provides a useful heuristic framework for making sense of leadership. He notes that leadership has traditionally been understood in four quite different ways: Leadership as Person; Leadership as Results; Leadership as Position; and Leadership as Process. Where is purpose in this list? It might be argued that it is subsumed within 'Results'. A results-based assessment of leadership surely must encompass the quality of the purpose implied by the results that were achieved by a given group? We note, however, that this kind of assessment predominantly focuses on the extent to which the stated goals of that group are achieved, rather than the quality of the purpose which underpins these goals. Purpose only appears to come to the fore in situations in which leaders have set goals that project their groups to either ethical and moral debates. The widely celebrated and vilified examples of Gandhi and Hitler spring most readily to mind. We argue that the lack of explicit orientation towards the manifestation of purpose is not an oversight. In the field of business and society the issue is most central (See Schwartz and Carroll, 2008 for a review of the prominent debates and frameworks in this field). The pivotal debate regarding the linkage between corporate responsibility and social responsibility are neatly summarized in the 'amoral' and 'moral' perspectives. The classical

economist amoral perspective is neatly encapsulated in the following quotation from Freidman (1962):

Business has only one social responsibility 'to use its resources to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say that it engages in open and free competition without deception and fraud. In a sense, an amoral perspective in which there is no place for moral considerations in the corporate context. From this perspective all corporations relentlessly pursue maximum profits. A director cannot and may not allow himself moral standards' (Kaptein and Wempe, 2002: 116).

While, in contrast, Galbraith (1977) galvanized a moral response – a general human perspective. For example, the moral social debate to balance the needs of individuals (for example to protect jobs), a responsibility towards society and future generations, and the sustainable need to generate profits. Aligned with this debate is another debate taking place within business ethics regarding leadership. The division between management and ownership in corporations arguably can lead to the erosion of responsibility. However, the legitimacy of leadership rests on a social mandate: 'In return for this mandate the corporation must be prepared to carry out a socially responsible policy and justify it to society' (Kaptein and Wempe, 2002: 119).

The field of business ethics is perhaps the most instructive to a discussion of purpose in leadership studies (Price, 2005; Cuilla and Forsyth, 2011). It suggests the importance of agency [leadership] in the debate and the complexity of purpose within corporate contexts. The field has empirically examined and theorized from a multitude of widely publicized corporate crisis cases – such as the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the Union Carbide poisonous leak in Bhopal, and Johnson and Johnson's Tylenol recall – and developed frameworks for intervention: CSR, Business Ethics, Sustainability, Stakeholder Management and Corporate Citizenship (Schwartz and Carroll, 2008). Much of the discussion in this field revolves around the role of leadership and management preoccupations within the corporate contexts. By way of contrast, work within the field of leadership has been characterized by rather limited, often polemic and naively simplistic commentaries on purpose.

There are a few notable exceptions, in particular the work of Robert Greenleaf and James McGregor Burns. The work of Greenleaf (1977) brought to the fore the notion of Servant Leadership: 'standing for what is good and right even when it is not in the financial interest of the organization. . . . Greenleaf proposed that providing meaningful work for employees is as important as providing a quality product or service for the customer' (Yukl, 2006: 420). This argument is closely related to the work of Burns and the antecedent argument for transformational leadership in which he argued that transforming leadership is a process of leaders and followers raising one another to higher levels of morality and motivation (Burns, 1978: 20). A fundamental argument of Burns was that transforming leadership is a process that changes leaders and followers; through this process of seeking highest levels or morality they consider 'not only what is good for themselves, but also what will benefit larger collectivities such as their organization, community, and nation' (Yukl, 2006: 419). This form of transforming has significantly migrated to a refined and arguably instrumental basis within the adapted version of transformational leadership developed and greatly popularized within the work of Bass and Avolio (1990). In many respects this migration reflects a key tenet of this article: reflecting the argument of MacIntyre that societal purposes will be driven out of the discourses within organizations unless addressed through conscious intervention encapsulated within 'leadership as purpose'.

Notwithstanding the work of Greenleaf and Burns, Yukl (2006) acknowledges that few theories of leadership have been engaged in broader societal accounts of leadership. Learmonth (2003) makes a similar point in his critical review of 'new' public management. He suggests that critical management studies are sympathetic to 'understanding managers' worlds' type studies: however, he says they 'rarely invite us to reflect upon whether or not management practices may be complicit with wider sociological structures'. Learmonth also raises concerns about a priori assumptions about what managers do derive from standard texts rather than from empirical material and therefore could also be taken as a particularly loaded view of what managers do. Learmonth's conclusion is that 'managerial values (and arguably virtues) remain more or less in the background and, whilst they still influence the work, the assumptions themselves are not subject to rigorous theoretical and empirical consideration' (2003: 106).

Indeed, the nature and manifestation of societal purpose in leadership practice has been generally and regrettably overlooked. In the aftermath of the credit crunch we believe it is most timely that leadership as purpose is addressed. This article attempts to bring managerial virtues to the foreground and in doing so open up leadership and purpose to scrutiny in a way that will offer some very interesting and worthwhile debate associated with leadership theory and practice. Accordingly, we seek to directly address this oversight by stimulating a broader discussion regarding the nature of purpose within leadership. In this regard, we are suggesting that it would be worth considering building a fifth 'P' into Grint's leadership framework: that is, 'Leadership as Purpose'. In this way, the article serves to lay out a new research agenda for purpose-focused leadership research.

The first part of the article seeks to understand how purpose has been conceptualized within the philosophical realm as well as within the leadership literature. Our philosophical argument draws upon the moral philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre and his notions of purpose as 'internal goods' associated with well-being that are central to a good human life. Our examination of the extant leadership literature reveals a general lack of explicit concern with notions of purpose. Rather, the literature tends to implicitly assume and subsume purpose within the concepts of vision and sensemaking. The pioneering work of Smircich and Morgan is most helpful in this regard, with its intent to link leadership with the process of the management of meaning. We use a recently published work examining leadership of change in the National Health Service (Conroy, 2009, 2010a) to illustrate how purpose can become manifest in practice through examination of a leadership intervention. The discussion in the article suggests that linking MacIntyre's thesis with the work of Smircich and Morgan we can begin to build a conceptual understanding of social purpose and how leaders may attempt to create this through the fundamental role of leadership as management of meaning. The article concludes with an outline of possible research directions and contributions to leadership studies by exploring 'leadership as purpose'.

Defining purpose in human life: a philosophical view

Purpose can be seen, in its most general sense, as an aim or objective which guides action – achieving a goal in a particular context. In this way, discussion regarding organizational vision and mission can be assimilated into purpose and thus inter-related to organizational leadership. However, MacIntyre (2004) argues that the nature and functioning of an organization restricts the development of purpose in the societal sense. The societal perspective extends the debate to the notion of a worthy purpose: an aim that guides action in a broader

societal realm. Frankl (2004) argues that purpose is central to a good human life and that happiness comes from fidelity to a worthy purpose; while the absence or disconnection with, or perceived worthless nature of a purpose will lead to unhappiness within an individual. This is arguably the central cornerstone which 'leadership as purpose' is seeking to build from.

Purpose was anchored by Aristotle within his ideas regarding teleology – purpose being something that is inherent in all beings. Associated with teleological thought is the notion of extrinsic finality which consists of a 'being' realizing a purpose outside that 'being', for the utility and welfare of other beings (Howie, 1968: 41). Howie interprets Aristotle's notion of purpose as not simply about having an idea of what is purposeful, but also enacting a pursuit of that purpose. He argues that 'the highest good for man consists not merely in the possession [of a purpose] but in the exercise of it . . . Knowledge [of a purpose] merely possessed and not put to use is ineffective and useless' (1968: 47).

The preceding philosophical definitions of purpose place an emphasis on a societal notion of purpose as being a worthy idea and activity, the outcome of which is beyond the individual. By defining purpose in this way, we place special emphasis upon personal intrinsic value that connects to a societal need. As a consequence, purpose cannot be imposed through dictum, but rather is chosen (or not chosen), or accepted (or rejected), or adopted by individuals. Examples of common purposes to human life might be raising a family, pursuing public service or perhaps dedicating oneself to a creative vocation. That does not suggest that societal purpose can only be pursued outside the corporate organization; the social purpose that an individual may find worthy to invest of him or herself could be a corporate ideology.

In their highly influential best-seller, *Built to Last*, Collins and Porras (1994) observed that 'an enduring sense of purpose' was the most significant cause that appeared to explain why just a few companies maintained an outstanding performance over such a long period compared to their competitors. While there has been limited scholarly attention to the explicit notion of purpose in leadership studies, this is one loud and pervasive exception. In addition to emphasizing the importance of long-term versus short-term business success, it has highlighted and promoted to a global audience the salience and importance of purpose within leadership. This message resonates impressively with the practising managers with whom we have worked throughout the world who pay homage to the influence that this book and its sequel (Collins, 2001) has had upon their thinking about leadership.

Most salient to our arguments within this article is the work of MacIntyre (1997, 2004). His argument draws upon the Aristotelian philosophy, specifically the notion of *telos*, contributing to the good for humankind. A person will only feel fulfilled and gain a sense of well-being and purposefulness if they move towards their *telos*. It is the relationships that MacIntyre develops between virtues, practices, goods and *telos* that are critical to our understanding of the establishment of a 'good' purpose within leadership. MacIntyre conceptualizes virtues as dispositions to sustain social practices in which we participate. Virtues are acquired human qualities, the possession and exercise of which enable us to achieve what he describes as 'internal goods' as opposed to 'external goods' (2004: 251).

The distinction between internal and external goods is most helpful and central to our understanding of a social purpose. We can think of *external goods* as winning status, obtaining money, or gaining power. External goods are possessed by people – in a sense, extrinsic assets. In contrast, *internal goods* are a good for the whole community; examples of this would be the development of vocational skills, promoting health, preventing accidents and

saving lives. Returning to the notion of *telos*, it follows that the greater the virtue (i.e. disposition) towards producing an internal good, the greater the development of practice excellence in creating internal goods. This will lead, according to MacIntyre, to a person's greater sense of fulfilment and purposeful achievement. The internal goods are valued by society and thus seen as being purposeful – good for the human race.

The *telos* is a meta-goal; the internal goods are ordered and made sense of in terms of purpose by the *telos*. Following this line of argument, MacIntyre suggests that a meaningless life is one that lacks movement towards a *telos*. Such a movement is shaped by a quest oriented around two interconnected questions: What is the good for me? And what is the good for humankind? The *telos* is argued to be discovered through an individual applying virtues (or dispositions and feelings to act) through practices to achieve internal goods. These internal goods benefit society as 'good for humankind' and good for the individual. Thus, by enacting virtues and the achievement of internal goods, an individual develops a greater sense of well-being connected to a sense of societal purpose. The importance of *telos* is emphasized by McCann and Brownsberger as follows:

There must be some *telos* to human life, a vision anticipating the moral unity of life, given in the form of a narrative history that has meaning within a particular community's traditions; otherwise the various internal goods generated by the range of social practices will remain disordered and potentially subversive of one another. Without a community's shared sense of *telos*, there will be no way of signifying 'the overriding good' by which various internal goods may be ranked and evaluated' (McCann and Brownsberger, 1990: 227–28).

Beadle and Moore (2006) note that MacIntyre suggests corporate organizations tend to strip away at the social virtues which could lead to well-being for all and instead distort practices to emphasize the production and dominance of external goods. This is perhaps an inevitable tendency given that such organizations are necessarily concerned with producing external goods and need to be in order to survive. However, without some form of intervention to sustain virtues oriented to producing internal goods 'practices could not resist the corrupting power of institutions' (MacIntyre, 1997: 194). In this sense the 'good for man' – the *telos* – becomes increasingly secondary to the primacy of external goods. MacIntyre argues that managers are agents for extending this orientation and, as such, are poor moral representatives for the institution in which they work. Managers are thus seen to inevitably increase the emphasis upon external goods and the parallel decline in internal goods and the exposition of *telos*. Moore (2008: 499) suggests that 'The first requirement of a business organization with a virtuous character would be that there is good purpose' and that it is a requirement particularly for senior managers to ensure that this is the case. Randels (1995) agrees that managers should not only consider the means but constantly consider and, if necessary, challenge the ends of the organization. Purposes that are pronounced in dominant leadership discourses reflect objectives, mission and vision. Aligned to the delivery of these forms of purposes are discourses oriented towards performance management in the form of key performance indicators, action plans and a balanced score card. The outcome is the production of external goods and practices oriented to the production of these external goods.

MacIntyre (1985) suggests that the harbinger of such misdirected good intentions was the Enlightenment and that we now exist in a post-virtuous era, coping with the loss of a binding discourse of ethical practice in our dealings with others. Operating outside social and historical traditions, people (and businesses) have had placed upon them the considerable

burden of becoming their own moral authority. Practices in private and now our public- and third-sector institutions have succumbed to the corrupting influence of money, status and power. Recent events in the financial markets, MPs expenses and fixing of TV voting, Formula 1, football and cricket would seem to concur with MacIntyre's thesis. The perverse effects on hospital practices in response to target setting show that the public sector is not immune (Pidd, 2005).

In this section of the article we have argued that leaders and followers are heavily influenced by organizational structures, practices and expectations that orientate them towards transactional processes that generate external goods. Consequently, we understand that discourses affecting notions of purpose are complex and shaped by powerful institutionalized organizational structures and arrangements that tend to result in limited emphasis being placed upon societally desirable ends and the attendant minimization and marginalization of the creation of internal goods. Further on in the article we will examine the leadership practices within a particular empirical setting through the lens of MacIntyre to help illuminate the tensions that are created in achieving internal goods within organizations. Prior to this discussion we explore notions of purpose in leadership studies. In particular our bias towards understanding leadership is to place emphasis upon leadership as a process: a leader-led relational process oriented towards sensemaking. Through this lens we begin to forge a link with MacIntyre's schema of purpose to help establish the foundations of our conceptualization of leadership as purpose.

Leadership and purpose: a process of sense-giving?

Earlier we noted that purpose is arguably assimilated or axiomatically assumed within leadership discourse that emphasizes vision, objectives and mission. However, even within this literature we have failed to detect explicit reference to purpose. For example, no mention of either the word 'purpose' or 'meaning' occurs within standard leadership texts such as those produced by Yukl (2001), Daft (2005), Gill (2006) or Kouzes and Posner (1997). Bass (1990) makes a passing reference to purpose in citing the work of Vaill (1983) that highlighted 'purposing as a continual flow of actions that generate the effect of inducing clarity, consensus and commitment' (1983: 29). This does not mean that purpose is overlooked; implicitly, purpose is evident in the discussions. The important aspect we are highlighting is that vision, or mission, or objectives are oriented to corporate purposes that deliver external goods. There is limited discussion in regard to differentiating between corporate and societal goals, visions, objectives and the implications of this limitation to organizational leadership: the two examples outlined above of the credit crunch and National Health Service targets illustrate anecdotally the impact of limited attention given towards creating internal goods on management practice.

One leadership text that does emphasize the importance of meaning and (implicitly) purpose is that of Drath (1998). Situated within his ideas regarding distributed leadership, Drath argues that leadership is more than a person; it is a sense of purpose, a force that gives people a common direction (1998: 406). He anchors these notions of purpose and meaning in transformational leadership in a persuasive manner. Drath also predicts that, in future, leadership might still include influence, motivating followers and the interpersonal skills of the leader, but it will also place an increasing emphasis upon systemic relationships and mutual meaning-making (Drath and Palus, 1994). Similarly, Parry and Hansen (2007) have argued that 'organizational stories' may well be eclipsing leaders as the focal point for

creating leadership. The related work of Heifetz (1994) views ethical leadership as a dyadic and collective process that seeks to frame discussion and develop collective efforts to achieve goals.

A further notable exception is the empirical investigation conducted by Parameshwar (2006) of how ten transformational leaders of global social change (e.g. Paulo Freire, Nawal El Saadawi and Aung San Suu Kyi) constructed their 'higher purpose'. In particular, he highlights the significance of personal suffering at an early age in forging these leaders' desire to serve others who shared their suffering. The commonality of the suffering appears to have forged a community towards a common purpose. Examples of collective community based interests within an organization can be seen to reflect the context of organizational crisis; such crises have been cited as significant factors in assisting the leadership of change. Most notably, Kotter (1996) exhorts leaders to influence their followers to unite towards a shared vision (or purpose).

Although there are limited explicit empirical and theoretical explorations of leadership as purpose, there are many aspects of leadership theory that may be seen as a proxy for the terms 'purpose' and 'meaning'. Discussions that implicitly acknowledge and incorporate the affect of purpose have been wrapped in the cloak of visionary leadership theory (see for example Conger, 1989; Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1996; Nanus, 1992; Vail, 1998). Additionally, charismatic leadership theories draw extensively upon the concept of vision within the work of House (1977), Conger and Kanungo (1987) and Shamir et al. (1993). Finally, transformational leadership (Bass, 1985), and latterly authentic leadership (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005), encapsulate purpose within the notion of 'inspirational motivation' as a key task for leaders (Bass, 1985). The primary focus of both transformational and authentic leadership work has ostensibly been on correlating leaders' abilities to skilfully accomplish the management of meaning of work in terms of an idealized vision, or through intellectual stimulation, with the goal of enhanced motivation and extra effort on the part of their followers (Bass and Avolio, 1990; Densten, 2002; Hater and Bass, 1988; Howell and Avolio, 1993). The special emphasis placed upon the transformational leader's ability to manage meaning underlines the significance of sensemaking activities for elucidating purpose. Indeed, these studies appear to provide statistical support and evidence for the importance of inspirational motivation as a sub-category of managing meaning (Densten, 2002).

In the context of leadership, meaning-making is embedded within leader-led relationships. Uhl-Bien (2006) outlines an integrative argument that seeks to embrace a range of perspectives on leadership within the notion of relational leadership. We find this work particularly helpful as it establishes a foundation upon which an argument promoting leadership as purpose can be constructed. Smircich and Morgan (1982) (and, similarly, Weick, 1995; Pye, 2005; and to an extent Heifetz, 1994) have outlined a persuasive case that leadership can be productively seen as a process of framing and managing meaning. They state, 'leadership lies in large part in generating a point of reference against which a feeling [by followers] of organization and direction can emerge' (1982: 258). In essence, Smircich and Morgan argue that leadership involves a process of defining reality in ways that resonate with the led. They structure this process into three stages through which leaders provide a focus for the creation of meaning for their followers: framing and shaping context – isolating an element of experience within the context it is set; interpreting the significance of the issue; and grounding the subsequent action within the interpretation of meaning of that action (1982: 262). Connecting this process to the arguments made in this article, we note that the

management of purpose or meaning is both a central process and a key challenge for leaders. This challenge specifically relates to stage two of this process, namely the interpretation of meaning. At this stage, different interpretations may emerge that contest the meaning attributable within a particular contextual flow. Thus, the challenge for a leader is 'to manage meaning in a way that individuals orient themselves to the achievement of *desirable ends*' [emphasis added] (1982: 262).

We have argued that purpose is central to leadership and research has illustrated that the presence of purpose can have desirable motivational affects on followers. Through the work of Smircich and Morgan, we recognize that the processes of managing meaning seeks to align followers' sensemaking activities in a particular direction. But such alignment needs to resonate with 'desirable ends'. Thus, we return to MacIntyre's philosophical arguments with respect to defining desirable ends in terms of virtues, internal goods and *telos*. MacIntyre argues that institutions, whose purpose is in the generation of external goods, will inevitably generate and privilege discourses that minimize virtues and limit the production of internal goods (MacIntyre, 2004). Yet Smircich and Morgan argue that leaders have dual and potentially conflicting roles: to maintain the institutionalized order and structures, and to rise above the formal structures and provide meaning and direction involving the embodiment of values and purpose (1982: 260).

If Smircich and Morgan's (1982) notion that the primary task of leadership is making sense of the flow of organizational experience is connected to MacIntyre's (1997, 2004) philosophy that incorporates virtues, '*telos*' and 'internal goods', we can construct a normative leadership process that seeks to manage the meaning of follower experiences towards sustaining virtues to develop internal goods of personal excellence in order to achieve *telos* – a good for humans. Examples of such 'goods for humans' might be alleviating poverty, sustaining communities, liberation through education, or reducing an organization's carbon footprint.

Building on the last example, the conjoined work of Smircich and Morgan and MacIntyre might provide us with the following exemplary leadership scenario framed within a narrative of social responsibility. The sensemaking of a project to reduce organizational energy consumption may be framed by a leader within organizational efficiency goals; it might also be a useful short-term project for the organization and be good for an individual's career. These would be examples of external goods. Alternatively, the leadership discourse could be framed as fulfilling a societal purpose in that it provides a connection beyond the organizational boundaries and is 'good for collective human wellbeing'. The project can assist thinking about and stimulating action towards the reduction of the company's carbon footprint in a global context and assisting in the broader efforts to limit and reverse global warming. These would both be good examples of pursuing internal goods.

How widely do such social purposes, as defined by the production of internal goods, permeate and infuse everyday leadership discourse? The notion of survival, or beating the common enemy, are conventional purposes by which leaders frequently manage the meaning and interpretation of context in order to bind followers together and overcome resistance to change (Smircich and Morgan, 1982). In a similar vein, as we noted earlier within the leadership of change literature, Kanter (1984), Kotter (1995, 1996) and Pendelbury et al. (1998) all advocate galvanising support around a crisis. Although company survival (which is an external good) is arguably a 'worthy purpose', how central is it to a good human life? Can leaders in organizational contexts through processes of sense-giving generate sustainable virtues that deliver internal goods alongside external goods and thus help followers explore

their *telos*? The next section explores these questions through the work of Conroy (2009) which examined an intervention in the National Health Service that drew explicitly upon MacIntyre's notions of virtues, internal goods and *telos*.

Case study: a clash of purpose

In an earlier empirical study Conroy (2010a) described the observed tensions that developed within a National Health Service Trust and hinged on competing notions of purpose as a clash of corporate and societal ends. These tensions were given voice through respondent stories and narratives. In a subsequent study involving a leadership educational intervention that the author engaged in within this workplace context he explains how he supported the managers involved in a specific project by helping them to better understand the purpose that was inferred by policy initiatives (Conroy, 2009). Finding clarity around a purposeful way forward with what seemed like irreconcilable practice dilemmas was ostensibly achieved by drawing on MacIntyre's thesis. To help sensemaking for the managers Conroy describes the application of a narrative-based schema that seeks to connect virtues with goods produced within the practice of their institution (Moore and Beadle, 2006). We wish to utilize the work of Conroy and have outlined in detail both the methodology and findings. This powerfully illustrates the opportunity of using ideas from MacIntyre to inform leadership development and making salient notions of leadership as purpose.

Drawing on MacIntyre's (1981: 273) three-stage summary of the development of virtues work, Conroy (2009) sought to help the managers identify the internal goods of their practices: at stage one virtues necessary to achieve the goods internal to practice were identified (for example, quality improvements to the way mental health patients are treated); at stage two qualities contributing to the good of a whole life emerged (examples of which were practitioners feeling more satisfied and fulfilled in their work with patients); and at stage three the pursuit of a good for human beings was identified (expressed as all of us benefitting from improved treatment and well-being of people suffering mental health problems and who live in our communities). Conroy (2009) describes how by illuminating and moving towards a communally agreed set of virtues anchored in situated participation in practices of the National Health Service Trust came the emergence of a communal narrative of what would serve the *telos* of well-being for all in society. In essence, this involved enabling purpose to be anchored to the virtues and practices of the institution; and, through collective narrative, encouraging the development of virtues within institutional practices and the production of internal goods. The leadership programme described above informed managers of the antecedents of the imperatives being placed upon them and allowed them to see the purpose they were wittingly or unwittingly forming. Conroy describes how their initial response to this illumination was anger as they realized that some of the activities they were sanctioning were leading towards ends that they fundamentally disagreed with. This activated their courage to challenge some of the initiatives that were being placed upon them by centrally imposed targets and audits (2009). The programme was underpinned by needs expressed by managers as well as facilitated peer group support to share emotional and practical burdens and find clarity on the way forward. It reinforced John Anderson's notion that it is through conflict, and sometimes only through conflict, that we learn what our ends and purposes (*telos*) are and with the question 'Of what (wider) conflicts is (my conflict) the scene?' (Passmore 1962, p. xxii cited in MacIntyre, 1985: 163). Conroy describes

how this combination produced a programme that was designed to open awareness of the wider ideological battles and allow them to debate what that awareness means for their practice decisions. By raising awareness of the wider social and ethical debates through the researchers' commentary Conroy comments that the programme attempted to meet management education needs in a 'self-forming' rather than a 'self-enslaving' (Thomas and Anthony, 1996: 292) management education programme. Downing (1997) suggests that it is the manager's job to resolve the conflicting change stories. By drawing on MacIntyre's *After Virtue* Conroy (2009: 264) argues that the challenge of resolving virtue conflict is like asking them to take on 'mission impossible' given the well-rooted antecedents of the virtues at stake.

Six sessions were designed, each in response to the constructed needs of participants and the wider groupings of managers. By opening the discussion with managers about the antecedents of their virtue clashes Conroy suggests that the programme was designed to allow them to discover options that, in the midst of reform, still offer them 'internal goods' (a feeling of excellence, well-being and satisfaction) in their management of health and social care practice. Furthermore, the programme should be faithful to a collective purpose of improving the quality of healthcare offered by the services they manage.

Importantly, Conroy (2009) outlines the roles of the individuals who made up the cohort of 24 delegates; it constituted people in executive, management team and direct report positions and accountable for leading the translation and implementation of reform policies, guidelines, frameworks and measures into healthcare practice improvements. Each of the six meetings offered an incisive commentary and an opportunity for delegates to explore personal thinking on the application of ideas to real-time issues within their organizational setting. The debates were facilitated in small groups of around six people and each person was given an opportunity to discuss their work issues. After the small groups, plenary reconvened and delegates had a further chance to raise issues and questions with the commentators. Three months after the programme completed participants were interviewed and asked what the programme had meant for them at a personal and service level. Some of their comments are given below (Conroy, 2009: 268):

'Made me quite angry'.

'Found it cathartic'.

'I came out of "Leading Change" a changed person'.

'Kaboom: it clarified the difference between leadership and management'.

These quotes convey a story of progression in terms of the personal impact the programme had on many of the participants. As they began to realize that many of the activities they were engaged in were aligned with purposes and values that were in pursuit of the external goods of money, status or power. This realization invoked their anger that they had been following policies and guidelines that did not bring internal goods to them, their staff or their patients. The quote referring to 'a changed person' highlights the claim that they had changed or reformed their approach to leading change. Their purpose became clearer and they reconnected to ethics that had become buried due to the continual pressure to meet targets and imperatives. Some had expressed feelings of powerlessness at the start of the programme and a resignation. The sense was that their righteous anger overcame this feeling of powerlessness and they became powerful again ('Kaboom'), as they knew what the right thing was to do. They had become leaders with a purpose and a rekindled passion for ensuring that internal goods were not corrupted by the drive for external goods and not

just leaders by title. We also asked them what this personal impact had meant in terms of service outcomes:

‘I am more courageous now in my assertion of doing the right thing in the organisation rather than meeting targets’.

‘There is no way we would have taken on this new work without understanding the values at stake’.

‘Now I feel it is not about who we commission more about what patients need’.

This second set of quotes conveys a story of re-engagement with the services three months after they return from the programme. With renewed courage and passion they go back to their organizations and start to assert their leadership in ways that make them question, for example, targets and commissioning in the light of the ethics behind their activities. Their emphasis is on values and ethical choices as they become clear on what they as leaders are there for – achieving internal goods in a way that will benefit the patients. Overall, the outcome was that the programme seemed to (re-)construct courage and develop a clearer purpose for them and their organization.

By understanding the antecedents of the ideologies that they were perpetuating, participants could take a critical perspective on how their practices were gradually being invisibly colonized (Willmott, 1993); more able to appreciate the broader social purpose and impact of the competing ideologies and make a purposeful choice. Therefore, in the midst of massive reform, MacIntyre’s ideas still offered ‘internal goods’ in their management practice that were faithful to a collective purpose (*telos*) of improving the quality of healthcare offered by the services they manage. Some of the programme participants claimed they rediscovered the virtue of courage: breaking the rules and enabling them ‘to do the right thing’ in the midst of competing and conflicting reform pressures (2009b: 11).

The enthusiasm with which this pilot programme was received provides anecdotal support to our argument that leadership studies needs to pay more attention to purpose and supporting managers in the face of the conflicts that arise when they make salient ends as well as means.

Discussion: implications for leadership theory and leadership practice

So, to what extent is it possible for social purpose to be developed and articulated within corporate leadership discourse? We believe that this is possible but not without considerable appreciation of the context in which it is to become manifest, the constraints on the nature of such societal discourse, and subsequent carefully considered deliberate leadership sensemaking of appropriate end goals. We argue that the numerous calls for more ‘vision’ and societal meaning in leadership practice simply underestimate the complexity of achieving this seemingly axiomatic need. The structural internalized scripts (Blackler and Regan, 2006) infused into daily organizational life of transactional expectations make changing the discourse towards the creation of internal goods and transformational social purpose highly problematic and require considerable attention. With such difficulty, is it worth the effort?

It has been argued earlier in this article that the attendant gains through generating a societal meaning to work relate to strong emotional engagement, physiological and psychological energy, and enhanced motivation and commitment. How can these gains be achieved if the MacIntyre thesis holds for organizational practices and in particular being shaped by the management realm? Paradoxically, it is on management through the process of leading

that we need to focus to understand how virtues, internal goods and worthy purpose may be pursued within a corporate context.

The National Health Service case study illuminates the agency, the conflicts and the tensions that appear to be prevalent in organizational contexts. Such tensions, we argue along with MacIntyre, are not easily expressed as they do not accord with the dominating discourses that lead to the preoccupation with external goods – profit, surplus, value for money, shareholder return etc. In related work, conducted within the context of the private sector, Watson (2003) notes that ethical considerations have been examined in a very limited way to date. His interest is in moral agency and he finds that managers can influence the morality of the organization as long as they can establish ‘business grounds’. He elegantly summarizes one of the gaps in understanding:

It would be significant to discover how far managers vary in the extent to which they ‘go with the flow’ of the pressures from internal and external constituencies or tend to bring together such pressures with their private moral concerns and act in a way which is both corporately expedient and satisfies personal moral concerns (Watson, 2003: 182).

Watson concludes that we need to look at the extent to which personal ethical assertiveness is possible. Extending this notion of ethical assertiveness we suggest a fundamental need to recognize as well as expose the need for a moral and societal purpose in balance with the inevitable hard-nosed ‘business ground’ described by Watson. For MacIntyre this is not possible unless there is agentic action; the agents are managers who are unaware of the pervasive ideologies shaping the seemingly inevitable growth in external goods over internal and purposes framed and limited in discourse to this achievement. However, the National Health Service case described above (Conroy, 2009) illustrates the opportunities for such positioning to occur; in this case through reflective intervention to enable leadership sense-making organized around MacIntyre’s central arguments regarding internal and external goods delivered through virtue practices framed by a broader sense of purpose.

The work of Smircich and Morgan (1982) provides a complementary re-enforcement of this agency argument with reference to the dual role of leaders to both sustain the organization, as well as to re-interpret structures with a focus on values and desirable ends. We would further argue that it is through leadership, most notably its fundamental role of the management of meaning (Pye, 2005; Smircich and Morgan, 1982) that can generate a balance of external goods and internal goods, and thereby halt MacIntyre’s argument for the inevitable decline of virtues, internal goods and societal purpose as a result of everyday corporate and management practices. Hence, the paradox that only through the institutional agency role within management practices of leading can the development of virtue practices and internal goods be sustained in the organizational context to allow societal purpose to get a foothold. In a sense this continual decline in orientation towards internal goods in contrast to the inter-related growth in focus on external goods generates the notion of a ‘purpose gap’. To reduce this gap and generate a sustainable balance is the necessity of ‘leadership as purpose’: a leadership-led discourse oriented towards sensemaking of the context and purposes of work. Without such discourse of ‘leadership as purpose’ there is a general tendency for purpose within business and the public sector to become overly preoccupied with the outputs of external goods – profit, shareholder return, value for money, or efficiencies. It is important, but alone it may not provide a broader societal purpose that connects individuals’ contributions to greater goals beyond the organization in which they work.

Recent work by Schwartz and Carroll (2008) examines definitional debates regarding CSR, business ethics, stakeholder management, sustainability and corporate citizenship, and the increasing salience of these perspectives for management attention. They conclude by recommending a synthesis of the debate by suggesting a model: VBA – Value, Balance and Accountability. Of significance to our discussion is the emphasis placed upon value ‘that all firms have an obligation to work towards generating net social value; in other words [organizations] are expected to improve the general welfare of society’ (2008: 168). The notion of balance is suggested to address the issue of sustainability and the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1999). We interpret balance and value as achieving something of purpose that is comprised of both internal and external goods. The final notion of accountability draws on the work of Waddock (2002) and is directed towards ‘taking responsibility for ‘the impacts of their practices, policies and processes’ (2002: 219). Accountability emphasizes the impact of the agency action of management.

However useful this model is in capturing the essence of the CSR debate, its practical usefulness will be limited without addressing the VBA model through the lens of leadership as purpose. The organizational desire to generate ‘improved welfare of society’ will be undermined by the nemesis of the corporate discourse for external goods. Arguably only through placing emphasis upon ‘leadership as purpose’ can the ‘purpose gap’ be closed and the sustainability balance be achieved. The interconnection of CSR and leadership discourse is one of a number of areas where research would help to explore the development of this theoretical exploration of leadership as purpose. The importance of purpose in leadership is not in doubt. The axiomatic assumption or generalization of purpose as unproblematic is prevalent in debates. A theoretical argument asserting the urgency and the complexity of leadership as purpose has been outlined along with a simple frame to guide thinking about purpose in leadership using MacIntyre’s thesis. The next important stage is to develop out our understanding of leadership as purpose through empirical research. We suggest that this is a rich and fertile area for future research. An agenda might involve a detailed qualitative understanding of managers’ perceptions of purpose within a range of contexts – that is, the lived experience of leadership as purpose – as well as examining particular contexts in depth to understand the discourses associated with purpose – possibly through ethnographic or autoethnographic approaches (see Kempster and Stewart, 2010, for a review of autoethnographic research in situated leadership practice). Research could also be conducted into contrasting cases between the private, public and third sectors and how the discourse on purpose and its role in leadership practice differs between each. In particular the case outlined in the article draws from the Health Sector. As such there is an intrinsic and extrinsic sense of the societal purpose of health. In the private sector societal purposes may be very difficult to articulate and promote where the institutional structures and practices promote and privilege external rather than internal goods (MacIntyre, 1997).

A related line of inquiry might include exploring the development of CSR initiatives within the private sector and the possible manifestation of leadership as purpose generated through such explicit overtures towards a broader concern for private organizations. The role of CSR described earlier is most germane in this context (Basu and Palazzo, 2008). It has a very real potential to be captured within a leadership discourse to illustrate a balance of internal and external goods, and address the purpose gap. Along these lines, leadership researchers, perhaps in conjunction with CSR researchers could also investigate leadership strategies and tactics that are utilized by the CSR ‘czars’ who are typically charged with the responsibility of promoting CSR within organizations and implementing CSR initiatives.

These individuals would literally be working to constantly traverse the divide between internal and external good production within their organizations – which would undoubtedly involve trade-offs, compromises and deal-making. Indeed, we anticipate considerable complementarity in the preoccupations and approaches between these two scholarly communities. Leadership scholars have been generally stronger in terms of their agency focus and processual orientation; CSR scholars, on the other hand, are generally stronger in terms of their policy focus and outcome orientation.

Reflecting on the methodology of the case study within this article, an in-depth qualitative exploration of a CSR initiative might illuminate structures and practices that affect leadership. Again drawing on the case study illustrated in this article (from Conroy, 2009), researchers could also examine leadership development interventions and the implications on practice of engaging managers in conversations orientated around societal purpose in organizational contexts

Our contribution seeks to bring to the fore issues of purpose in leadership studies in a bid to stimulate reflection and generate a new direction for research in this area. As such, then, this article presents a philosophically informed theoretical examination of purpose in leadership. The work of MacIntyre is foundational to this discussion in the sense that types of purpose need to be delineated. Moreover, leadership researchers need to recognize that societal purposes are potentially most problematic for leaders within organizational contexts. The central argument of MacIntyre is that societal purposes will be driven out of the discourses within organizations. Paradoxically (in terms of MacIntyre's jaundiced view of management), we argue that, through the intervention of leadership as fundamentally a sense-making activity, such discourses concerning social purposes can be brought to the fore. Our conceptualization of 'leadership as purpose' thus reflects this argument.

In conclusion we suggest that there is a necessity to foreground 'leadership as purpose'. We argue that within leadership studies we need to develop a more nuanced and grounded understanding of how purposeful leadership discourse occurs in practice in order to gain a keener appreciation of the circumstances that promote and constrain such discourse. In essence, this article argues that the apparently axiomatic need for leaders to engage followers in societally purposive discourses is highly problematic for leaders engaged in everyday organizational practice and is, therefore, highly deserving of our attention and scholarly inquiry.

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