

**The Meaning of Leadership in the Civil Service – an
Hermeneutic Study**

Oliver Couch

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
of Sheffield Hallam University
for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration**

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Abstract

There has been much written about leadership; so much in fact that it tends to cloud rather than illuminate the issue. But little of that work has been about how leadership is understood by professionals in their workplace and the impact that has on their day-to-day activities. This research covers the period from early 2002 until the end of 2004, and includes fieldwork in the Department of Education and Skills (as it was known until June 2007). The research was conducted in a traditional hermeneutic style from a critical perspective, and the evidence is taken from interviews with twelve senior civil servants. There were three aspects of leadership that came to the fore in the research. First, leadership in the civil service cannot be satisfactorily described by existing models in the academic literature. For these civil servants, leadership is made up of four elements, vision, motivation, monitoring progress and reaching planned outcomes, which itself could lead back to renewed vision. Thus there was a cycle from conception to results. This thesis proposes a new model of leadership that describes this cycle, called the Leadership Circle. Second, training in leadership is problematic (some trainees think it very valuable; others see little or no worth in it) and discussion on it throws up some unexpected related issues such as isolation in the workplace and lack of confidence amongst leaders. The way training in leadership is set in the wider context of support for leaders needs to be re-considered by HR departments; there is a wide range of benefits that can accrue if leadership training is seen as part of a suite of continuing support. Finally, civil servants' scope to act as leaders is constrained by the parallel role filled by Government Ministers. Theoretically there is a clear division of responsibility and authority between the two groups but there are overlaps in the day-to-day situation. And the roles of each group have changed significantly over the last 30 years without any overt acknowledgement of that change or consideration of the consequences. Is either group well placed to deliver their evolved roles? It is suggested that this situation is serious enough to merit further work.

Declaration:

This thesis is all my own work, and has not been submitted for any other academic award.

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