1

Prologue: Why Write Another Book About Leadership?

A short history of how we come to be here

Our interest in the performance of leadership started almost ten years ago when a freelance theatre director called Kate Sinclair agreed to run some experiential sessions for participants on a leadership development programme that the first author was co-leading with Huw Richards and Deborah Davidson for senior managers in health and social care agencies in the North-West of England. Based on a combination of techniques used to build actors into theatre companies alongside voice and body work, they transpired not only to be highly enjoyable but were always reported as being helpful to participants in developing their leadership capability. They became – and remain – a highly regarded feature of all our subsequent programmes.

However, despite being popular and pertinent, they did not have much theoretical connection with the rest of the syllabus. Furthermore, most of the literature which discussed leadership and performance – which we shall explore in more detail later – did not seem to the current authors to have much depth or, upon closer inspection, was not really about performance at all (a case in point is Peter Vaill’s (1989) Managing as a Performing Art: new ideas for a world of chaotic change which was largely a personal reflection on the implications of complexity theory for organisations). Meeting Kate McLuskie – Director of the Shakespeare Institute at the University of Birmingham – provided a navigable route into the world of performance studies and to two ideas central to the argument of this book: the distinction between leadership “is” performance and leadership “as” performance; and the enactment, narrative and audience framework. These gave us a rubric around which to arrange a number of related ideas which previously had lacked focus.
Surprisingly, at least to us, many of the concepts that we encountered in performance studies were already familiar to us from our work with our Birmingham colleagues Tim Freeman and Perri 6 on the ritualistic and symbolic aspects of organisational governance. These were especially influential on our concept of leadership “is” performance. Simultaneously, Tim Freeman’s exploration of post-modernist and feminist sources pointed to some important ideas relating to performativity that came to shape our notion of leadership “as” performance; that is, the impact of (re)-iteration and (re)-citation that takes place in the warp and weft of organisational relationships. Together, we have written a number of papers on these topics (Peck et al., 2004b; Freeman & Peck, 2007; Peck et al., 2008; Peck et al., 2009; Freeman & Peck, 2009) which have inevitably shaped parts of this text.

Furthermore, our shared interest in what has become known as neo-Durkheimian institutional theory (NDIT) seemed to offer the prospect of rooting our notions of performing leadership in a robust and generalisable account of organisational context; despite the emphasis on context in leadership studies for most of the last hundred years, the field has not previously furnished such an account. In some respects, this book is the third in what has turned out to be a trilogy of texts in which the first author has been involved that explore the implications of applying NDIT to a range of issues in organisational studies. The first, Managing Networks of Twenty-First Century Organisations (Perri 6, Nick Goodwin, Edward Peck and Tim Freeman) was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2006. This publisher also issued Beyond Delivery: policy implementation as sensemaking and settlement (Edward Peck and Perri 6) in the same year. We shall return to our use of NDIT in a moment.

Developing these links between anthropology, sociology and performance studies enabled us to start to fashion a theory of performing leadership that connected Kate Sinclair’s experiential sessions with the more formal part of the development programmes. Furthermore, drawing on cultural studies and material from storytelling, discourse analysis, advertising and political science meant that we could flesh out the separate elements of the enactment, narrative and audience framework significantly.

It is important to note that most of the ideas in this text have been introduced to and debated with participants on our leadership development programmes; their practical value to leaders is one of the main motivations for codifying them in this text (and also explains the separate chapter on this topic in Section 4). Most of the ideas contained in