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UNESCO POLICY BRIEF 3 JUNE 2024

Centre for Applied
Human Rights

HUMAN RIGHTS LEADERSHIP

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Introduction

Leadership is integral to organisational practice across all sectors and settings. It relates to forms of decision-making and action that are individual or collectivistic, and includes strategic decision-making, such as how issues are 'framed' and risk addressed or managed. As a scholarly field, leadership has a vast and growing body of theoretical and empirical work. In the main, this work is rooted in studies and applications to the business world, and occasionally police and military settings. It is accompanied by a global industry of professional leadership consultants and organisations offering leadership training and development opportunities.

Yet in the world of human rights practice and activism, leadership is nebulous and largely unsupported. Recent reviews of the academic and grey literatures (Hoddy and Gray, 2020; 2022) reveal little publicly available material that deals directly and explicitly with leadership. What leadership means in a human rights context, how practitioners and activists appraise 'good leadership' and how leadership practice and development can be supported is unclear. Moreover, questions linger about the transposability of current leadership theory and practice to the lifeworld of human rights. Human rights practice tends, for instance, to be heavily value-laden. Activists and practitioners may routinely navigate threats to physical security and other risks. As such, the suitability of corporate leadership training and development remains unclear.

This brief summarises some of the main insights gleaned from two recent literature reviews and a research project on human rights leadership, completed at the Centre for Applied Human Rights (CAHR), University of York. It introduces some theories, concepts, frameworks and approaches from leadership work that may be used to inform the development of leadership training and development tools.

What is already written about leadership in human rights?

Recent reviews reveal how the available literature on human rights leadership is disparate and limited in scope (Hoddy and Gray, 2022; 2020). In brief, leadership in a human rights setting was found to remain unspecified. There were no attempts identified to develop such a definition as an analytical frame for examining or explaining concrete practices, processes or outcomes. In addition, there was only a small handful of empirical studies identified while most of the literature that did deal with leadership at some level tended to employ everyday ideas of leaders and leadership. In the main, treatment of leaders and leadership in the human rights literature is implicit or fleeting.

What theories, concepts, definitions and approaches from elsewhere could be useful for leadership training and development in human rights?

There are nevertheless some leadership theories, concepts, definitions and frameworks that are worth exploring further for what they might bring to an understanding of human rights leadership and for supporting leadership development.

Values-based leadership theories focus on practices and settings that are value-laden (ethics, morals). For instance, how far organisational and leadership outcomes can be explained by agreement and conflict over values. In CAHR's research project on leadership, values identified by participants included dignity, open-mindedness, equality, and commitment. But these were also sources of tension and disagreement among the group, in particular in relation to decisions and practices around collectivistic and more hierarchical styles of leadership. It is worth noting that

Amnesty International's wellbeing review in 2019 observed, among other things, that team members perceived a divergence in values between themselves and the organisation's leadership and the emergence of an 'us vs them' culture among staff and management.

Feminist leadership refers to a type of leadership practice that engages with gender power and challenges women face accessing formal leadership positions. It has been described as a corrective to hierarchical and autocratic leadership relations, emphasising instead 'democratic, weblike, collaborative relationships' (Eagly, 2007, p. xvi–xix). Batliwala develops what she terms the 'feminist leadership diamond' that has been applied, subsequently, in other settings including Oxfam's work on transformative leadership for women's rights (Brown et al., 2019). The diamond is made up of four components: a) power; b) principles and values; c) politics/purpose; and d) practices of leadership.

Collectivistic leadership is an umbrella term that captures a number of leadership approaches and styles, such as team leadership (Day et al., 2004; Burke et al., 2006), complex systems leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007), network leadership (Balkundi and Kilduff, 2006), and collective leadership (Friederich et al., 2009). These approaches vary but share a common emphasis on leadership that involves 'multiple individuals assuming (and perhaps divesting themselves) of leadership roles over time in both formal and informal relationships' (Yammarino et al., 2012).

Contexts for leadership help us think about how to connect individual and group practices to wider contexts, such as political, economic and cultural contexts and contexts characterised by crises and emergencies and so on. For instance, the way very masculinised organisational cultures can shape expectations around leadership and leadership styles.

Work on **extreme contexts and crises** may have relevance for human rights practice in challenging settings. An 'extreme' context is characterised as one where events exceed the capacity of an organisation to prevent them and the impacts that follow. In a human rights setting,

this could include the arrest of leaders and followers or repressive measures that undermine or interfere with organisational functioning. How the leadership responds in extreme contexts can intensify or attenuate levels of extremity (Hannah et al., 2009) with some attenuators (psychological, social, organisational resources) and intensifiers (time and level of complexity) identified in the literature. There have been efforts to taxonomise extreme contexts (Hallgren et al.) and work on leadership 'resilience' (Dartey-Baah, 2015).

Some insights from CAHR's human rights leadership action research project

Defining human rights leadership – a provisional definition of 'good human rights leadership' was outlined that was viewed as a starting point for investigating leadership in practice and through research. The definition captures points of agreement among the research group as well as points of disagreement that reflect some of the contingent and context dependent influences on leadership practice, but which can be seen to capture the requirement of good leaders to recognise difference and respond to, make decisions about, and negotiate areas of conflict and disagreement. Human rights leadership is, according to this definition,

multidimensional, characterised by the leading of oneself, the leading of others, leading with others and leading for others on the basis of particular values (especially dignity, fairness and equality) that are also expressed through practice.

Yet in decision making and action, human rights leaders must navigate and negotiate between different values and priorities, such as equality in decision making and protection of staff, that can be sources of tension, disagreement and conflict in teams. Good human rights leaders are attentive to the ways that social signifiers, such as gender and class, as well as organisational culture and local and wider culture, may shape

their leadership and relationships between people within organisations and movements. Human rights leadership is often emergent rather than planned or necessarily desired: activists can find themselves in leadership positions due to force of circumstance and without training, often having to navigate complex organisational and political contexts that are uncertain, repressive, and sometimes violent. Qualities that are especially important in challenging times include resilience and adaptability. Good human rights leadership is inherently reflective, honest, and characterised by awareness and learning.

Leadership as a 'loaded' term – A significant finding from work to define 'good leadership' refers to the manner in which using the terms 'leader' and 'leadership' interfere with this aim. The terms 'leader' and 'leadership' are imbued with meanings that vary socially and culturally and generate particular expectations. There is value in considering at the design stage and in delivery of future training whether to discard the term 'leader' altogether in favour of an alternative, such as 'protagonist'. This alternative could dispel particular social and cultural associations and expectations and allow participants to narrate how they see themselves as human rights actors. This may permit future projects to address leadership indirectly but possibly more effectively on the terms set out by the participant.

Reflective practice – Research findings suggest there are underdeveloped capacities for reflective practice (Schön, 1983) within organisations, including practice supervision for cultivating reflective team members. Supporting leadership practice and development in human rights requires not just reflective spaces for participants but work to institutionalise such spaces at the organisational level.

A framework for leadership development and practice

We offer a leadership framework which may be used for informing the design of human rights leadership development material and training (Figure 1). The framework also foregrounds the value of applied, action-oriented research in leadership that involves collaborating with leaders to experiment and reflect on practice. Extending Kolb's learning cycle (Kolb, 2015), the framework offers three lenses for human rights leadership identified through CAHR's research project:

Context – *the multiple internal and external systems, sub-systems and their interactions that enable and constrain options and opportunities for action, such as associated with social and organisational culture, and political, legal, economic, and ecological environments.*

The self – *the unique-to-self skills, knowledge, values, personhood and qualities of individual leaders, manifested in how they think, how they learn, and how they act.*

Agency – *the practice of leadership demonstrated by the defender, in a variety of contexts: leadership of self (or 'being a leader in your own life'); leadership of others; leadership with others; and leadership for others in networks, organisations and movements.*

Within the operation of Kolb's learning cycle, the discipline (as well as the skill and capacity) of the practitioner to reflect on action amidst the daily pressure of action and to be self-consciously choiceful (reflecting-in-action) within that daily pressure, distinguishes human rights leaders as more reflexive practitioners: awake to themselves and the expression of themselves through their work (Schön, 1983).

Furthermore, leadership development that attends to the four stages of Kolb's model through the lenses of context, self and agency may assist leaders to bring a deeper and more

informed analysis of experience, increasing the chances of more effective learning and more effective leaderful behaviour in the future. Briefly, the four stages of the cycle are as follows:

Concrete experience – The ‘daily doing’ of advocacy, meetings, decisions, relationship-building, administration, and other tasks. How people respond in the moment to the leader’s actions and words; what wider factors influence how their actions are interpreted in the short and longer terms; and how the knowledge of the person in front of them influences the words and non-verbal communication of the defender.

Reflective observation – Journalling, peer dialogue, coaching, solo thinking-time are ways

in which reflection can take place. The discipline in this stage of the model is to bring objectivity: to lead oneself in thinking or talking about an event without always being caught up in the emotions again; to name the separate the parts of what happened; to consider how yourself and others were perceived by you and how you were perceived; and the underlying factors or influences which may have been shaping the unfolding events.

Abstract conceptualisation – Also known as ‘sense-making’. This stage invites the creation of a narrative or explanation for why things turned out the way they did. The stage can include applying or seeking out theories (such

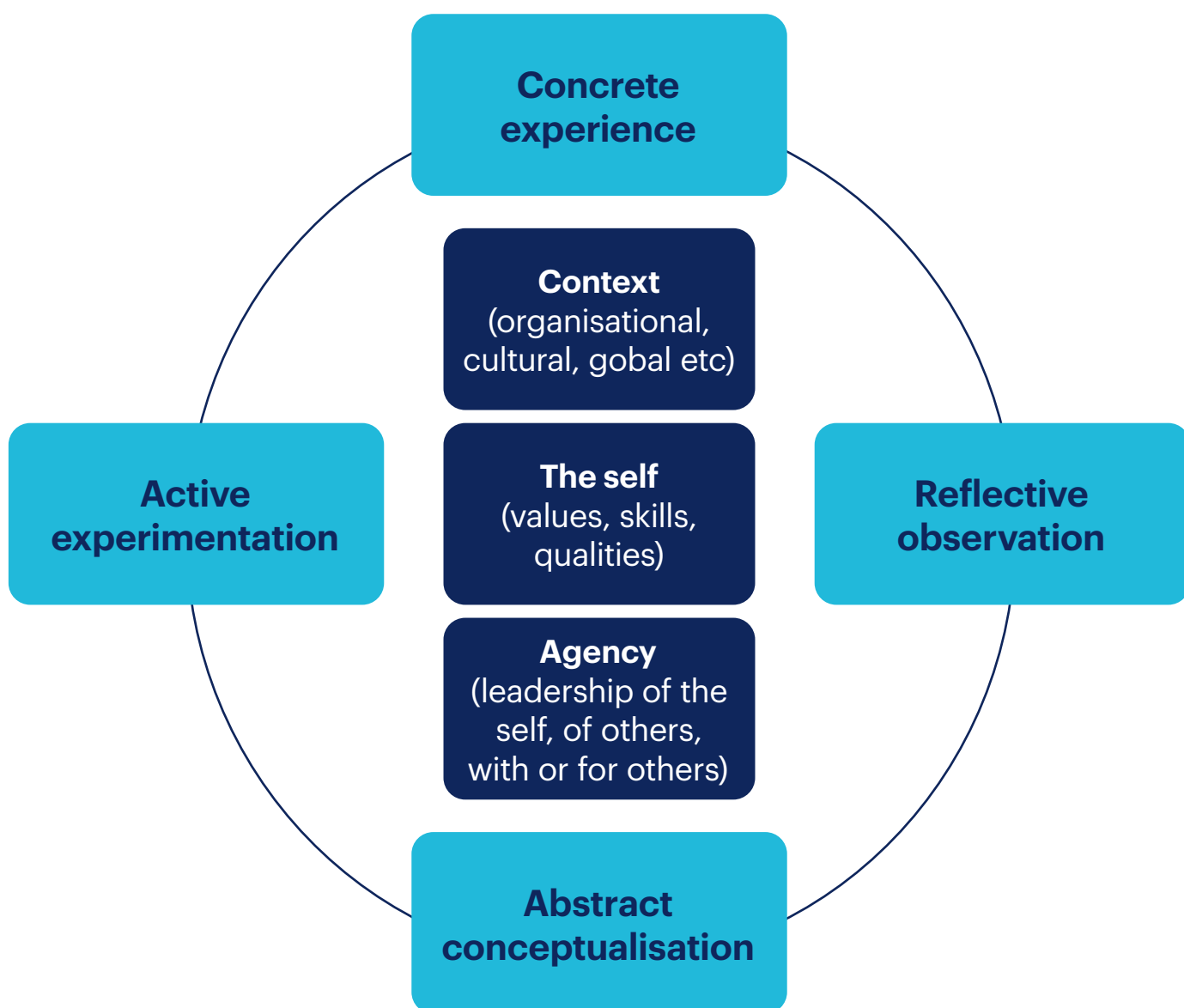


Figure 1

as models of human behaviour, gender theory, ethnographic insights, context analysis, etc.) which support an objective interpretation.

Active experimentation – Planning for concrete experience. Given how a leader may now understand more deeply the ‘What’ of their doing and how things came to happen the way they did, this stage of ‘Now what?’ invites an conscious set of decisions – either to ensure that positive outcomes are repeated in the future, or to minimise the risk of unhelpful outcomes occurring again. Interventions may be adapted to be more culturally sensitive or politically responsive. The leader may be carrying an intent to speak differently, or to listen more, or to bring a different ‘presence’ into their work. In essence, their leaderful behaviour is more nuanced, decided-upon (rather than reactive in the moment), and more consciously aligned to an emerging sense of how the defender seeks to be influential and effective in their context.

Recommendations

The key insights in this paper that inform the development of leadership training and development tools are:

- To accommodate leadership training and development within a broader programme to develop organisational capacities for reflective practice. This should include practice supervision for cultivating reflective team members.
- When developing new training material, treat the existing leadership theory and development as sources of insight and exploration rather than as blueprints, and, where possible, undertake needs assessments or co-design strategies with defenders and engage in piloting and testing.
- Consider training approaches that can address leadership questions and development indirectly by means of alternative vocabularies (e.g. ‘human rights protagonists’) that provide more scope for participants to narrate who they are as human rights actors and how their practice can be supported and strengthened.

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Recommended citation

Hoddy, E. (2024) 'Human Rights Leadership', York: UNESCO Chair in Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space, Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York. UNESCO Policy Brief 3.

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The Policy Brief Series is supported by funding from the University of York and a grant from the Open Society Foundations.

