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Expert Viewpoint

Character, Company and Context: A Practical Framework for Leaders Under Pressure

Ruth Turner[a], Jonathan Gosling[b] ✉

[a]*Forward Institute [Responsible Leadership Foundation], United Kingdom*

[b]*Business School, University of Exeter, United Kingdom*

Abstract

Leadership as practised by individuals, through collective effort and as a social accomplishment is affected by the personal character of the principal actor(s), the company they keep, and responses to more and less controllable aspects of context. These factors (character, company and context) become especially salient during crises. We develop and illustrate this heuristic by reflecting on the lived leadership experience of the first author. We conclude with a discussion of the applicability and limitations of the heuristic, especially where the legitimacy and responsibilities of leaders are highly contested. We thereby address three practical questions: (a) what leaders can and should do to form, strengthen and sustain the contributions of others to their leadership practice, (b) how subalterns, deputies or counsellors can assist a leader in this, and (c) how to develop the readiness and ability of leaders, subalterns, etc. to work in this way.

Keywords: Leadership, Leadership Training, Crisis, Responsible Leadership

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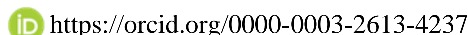
✉ Jonathan.Gosling@exeter.ac.uk  https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2613-4237

Introduction

There are many things that leaders can and should do to enhance their capacity for responsible leadership, whatever their natural gifts and propensities. There are also many functions of leadership that a leader cannot accomplish alone. These include some that are crucial in avoiding, mitigating or adapting to a crisis.

In the leadership literature, the role of 'others' working with a leader is often approached as 'collective' leadership (the work of deputies, assistants and delegates, for example) (Gronn, 2009; Ospina et al., 2020); as 'subaltern' leadership (accomplished through diverse and distributed agencies, contests and causalities) (Carranza et al., 2023; Sutherland et al., 2014; Thakur, 2019); or as the outcome of network or relational effects that are often unintended and culturally institutionalised (Maak & Pless, 2006; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Although these perspectives provide important insights into the multiple and varied contributions to the phenomena we describe as 'leadership', they pay inadequate attention to (a) what formally delineated leaders can and should do to form, strengthen and sustain these contributions, (b) how subalterns, deputies or counsellors can assist a leader in this, and (c) how to develop the readiness and ability of leaders, subalterns, etc to work in this way.

This article addresses these three questions through reflections on the first author's experience in a number of relevant roles: as a Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Board Director, entrepreneur, coach, consultant, campaigner and advisor to a Prime Minister. This experience has been gained mainly in the UK, Europe and the USA, though also significantly in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. We look forward to discussing its applicability in South Asia and elsewhere, and suggest that the insights proposed here may provide a basis for fresh theorising and analysis.

Our discussion suggests three levels of analysis and action for leaders, deputies, and leadership developers: personal, collective and contextual. Leaders should therefore be charged: "pay attention to your character, the company you keep and the context you work in".

These describe three conceptual domains which we address throughout the article and are also the elements of the heuristic we propose for ensuring leaders are well prepared for responsibly leading through crises. Choosing where to put attention, what to care about and how to respond require self-awareness and self-possession, crucial qualities for a leader that can be both enhanced and challenged by others – confidantes and critics.

Some Background

In this article we will draw on stories from the first author, Ruth Turner's experience in leading a social enterprise giving income and voice to homeless people (homelessness as a crisis of context); as a senior advisor to a British Prime Minister (an environment in which leaders face critical challenges to character when handling multiple and overlapping national crises); as the chief executive of a global foundation specialising in dialogue and countering extremism in conflict zones (where the company around a leader reinforces a shared social identity formed largely by crisis); and a decade of working with some of the UK's most significant leaders across public, private and social sectors. In reflecting on these stories, we will often use the first-person singular form (instead of plural) because many of the ideas we express include personal reflections of the first author (in a near autoethnographic manner), and we wish to maintain the immediacy of these personal reflections for the reader. We will switch to the plural when we are presenting broad reflections.

Thus, Ruth Turner's introduction: I, myself, have led organisations through crises – some inadvertent, some externally-driven, some self-induced; some of them awful and destructive, and some created for the purpose of deliberate disruption and re-imagining what might be possible if we pushed a chronic problem into the space of focussed attention. I have also had a seat next to some extraordinary leaders in business, governments, and civil society, allowing me to see what is said and done away from public view. I will not tell the specific tales or name those in the most sensitive of those conversations; however, I think gaining such privileged access to significant leaders brings with it a dual responsibility. Firstly, to maintain personal confidence and trust. Secondly, to draw useful general insights from experience gained in privileged settings for public benefit. This is the main aim of this article.

The second author, Jonathan Gosling, draws on 30 years of study of leaders and leadership to help frame our contribution towards leadership research and development more generally.

We have worked together since 2014, helping to form and develop a non-profit organisation – The Forward Institute – dedicated to exploring questions of responsible leadership and supporting leaders in enacting it in significant UK public service organisations, businesses and charities. We document these stories and discussions with the conviction that experienced practitioners and researchers can and should contribute in this way, in the full knowledge that our perspectives are limited and

partial. We hope for further debate on the topics, the assumptions, and the framework we present here.

Personal Observations from Professional Practice

Leaders of organisations, politics and civic society join their organisations or campaigns to build something, not firefight. Their job interview or electoral manifesto is an optimistic vision of a better company, a better country. And yet most days are filled with uninvited events, derailments from outside and in, coming at them at a relentless pace. Is surviving these crises all it will add up to? If they want their time to count for more, what do they need?

There are some, of course, for whom working in "crisis management" is a professional concern. I (Ruth Turner) work with many leaders who count among their strengths that they take on difficult challenges and thrive in a crisis. There is much we can learn from their clear-sightedness, their ability to stay calm and make wise choices to help others get past the immediate pressures into clearer space. However, for most people, this professional detachment and element of choice in facing a crisis is absent. Yet, many find that in these circumstances they step up to a degree that surprises even them. Can we learn from these leaders' experiences too?

Adversity can be the furnace out of which the best is forged; however, it can also bring out the worst in us. Under strain, I have seen usually benign people display great insecurity, selfishness, and anger – and I have reacted that way myself. We often attribute our leadership strengths to our character, and undoubtedly that is a major factor. However, my work with senior leaders over several decades has shown me that our leadership response is more often about the interaction *between* our *character* and *the company we keep*, (shared norms and standards) and the *context* we are in (pressures, constraints and opportunities).

I have also seen the complexity that holding power adds to the challenge of leading responsibly. Power is a mind-altering drug. Whatever our intentions may be, it distorts our thinking and behaviour, and we need others to help us understand it and exercise it well.

Power Changes Those Who Hold It

I first became interested in power when I did not have any, in the early 1990s I was co-founder of a social enterprise – the so-called 'voluntary sector' – working

with homeless people and drug addicts in a northern British city. We wanted not only to convince badly damaged individuals to completely change their lives, but institutions to radically change their policies and their practices towards those mostly on the edge of society. We had no money, no legitimacy, no expertise, no control, and no authority – just idealism, persuasion and a practical idea or two. We did make an appreciable difference, but I sometimes wondered how much more we could have done if we had been in charge.

Later in my career, I worked alongside some of the world's most powerful people. For a few years from 2005, I was a senior advisor to the then Prime Minister Tony Blair. In Government in those years, we experienced the triumph of winning the bid for the 2012 Olympic Games, the horror of the 7/7 suicide attacks on our capital city, the dilemmas posed by the intervention in Iraq and its aftermath, and the sheer hard work of continuing public service reform. Then, for seven years I worked with Tony Blair in his post-premiership period, setting up some of his charitable foundations. I attended lunches with Presidents and cabinet ministers in different countries, travelled on the private jets of some of the world's richest businessmen as they flew between their globe-spanning private investments, philanthropies and policy interventions, and sat in the shade with religious leaders as we tried to negotiate a lessening of the violent extremism that was plaguing so much of the world.

Up close, I could see what real power wielded badly could inflict: abuses, greed, hubris, and conflict. I also saw what it could create and enable: peace built, laws reformed, lives saved, investments made in communities, diseases treated and overcome, jobs created, and economies grown. Finally, I was also able to witness what power does to those who hold it.

Power changes us. Things happen to you – as a person, and as an organisation - when you are powerful. Power reduces our awareness of constraints and causes us to act more quickly. Power distorts our judgement: It gives us the illusion of control, even over random events. Powerful people downplay risks. They tend to think more abstractly, favouring the bigger picture over smaller consequences. This is necessary because a lack of prioritisation would paralyse us, but those 'smaller consequences' can often mean other people. We lose empathy when we gain power. We are less likely to take into account the perspective of others. Power protects and excuses power. We are more likely to make excuses for our own bad behaviour and to judge others harshly. We are less likely to face the consequences of our actions. Therefore, we not only take what we want because we are likely to go unpunished – but also

because we intuitively feel we are entitled to it. When we are powerful, we tend to think what we do must be right, because we would not have got where we are if we were not brilliant.

No one is immune to the possibility of these distorting effects. No matter how noble your goals, or how strong your morals are, the pressures and pleasures of power impact every one of us. A protection and antidote for this is paying great attention to who we gather around us; tending to our own character; and understanding the likely consequences of how the opportunities and constraints we face will shape us.

The Company You Keep

We like to think of ourselves as autonomous people, capable of independent thought and decision-making. However, we are who we are in great part because of our interactions with others. From our earliest childhood, we are shaped by those around us. Research (Center on the Developing Child, 2015) shows the impact on the brains of babies and children, of love and neglect, of comfort and poverty in their early years.

We believe this process of being shaped by, and shaping others, never really stops. We are constantly reacting to our environment and behaving at least in part in response to those around us, as public health and behaviour change experts know. Despite a greater push in the last couple of years for flexibility and individualisation of employment (largely a good thing), work is ultimately a collective endeavour. Where we can, we choose jobs in organisations that would allow us to make our own individual contribution to shaping the work – but also where we are happy to be a part of their culture and have that influence us too. We know that moods are contagious.

Being intentional about whom we spend the most time with is more important than we think – and is underestimated as a challenge for those whose diaries are largely organised by others. It is ironic that as leaders become more senior, they may lose control of one of the most important factors that influences the capacity for responsible leadership. Therefore, no matter how much work leaders do on developing and strengthening their sense of character, there will be some very human inhibitors to acting in line with individual values and against the group, especially when we are under pressure.

We will discuss three of them: having access to a restricted set of perspectives; barriers to full communication; and simply being too tired and overwhelmed.

Inhibitor 1: Restricted Perspectives

It is tempting to think that the view from the top allows you to see the whole vista, but your very presence as a three-dimensional being casts a shadow and you need help to see into the space where it falls. I (Ruth Turner) had an unusual and instructive experience some time ago. I left an organisation I had created and run for a period of maternity leave. I thought I knew every aspect of it inside out. Not only did I know every team member well – or so I thought – I had done the initial thinking on new areas of work that led to creating job descriptions and raising the funds for the role of each one. I had interviewed them, supervised them, worked with them closely and done or read every report and appraisal.

When I returned, I decided to hand over the role of chief executive permanently to my brilliant deputy. I stayed with the organisation and for the next year or so I worked part-time in a small team under the instruction of and accountable to those I had previously directed. I learned a lesson that should not have been a surprise to me: From the middle and the edge, an organisation looks completely different than it does from the top. I had hardly known it at all.

Someone I had previously regarded as a very pleasant but rather unproductive chatterer, I realised, was the social glue. The discreet and informal smoother of worries, the one who coaxed employees to look with a warmer light on their colleagues' actions, the one who helped each team member make sense of the work from their point of view, did more than I had ever realised to build the consensus upon which our leadership plans relied. A manager I had regarded as always "on it" and good at dealing with difficult team members, was perhaps just good at constructing a heroic role in problem-solving and projecting this impression up the hierarchy – and might even have been the origin of some of the difficulties in the first place. The processes that I had put in place when I needed solid reports to the Board turned out to be a key element of what stopped the best work from happening in the first place. And when the new boss asked her assistant to cancel a long-planned meeting because something urgent and unexpected needed attention – as I had done countless times when I was in charge and juggling priorities – I saw the face of the colleague who had to explain this to others who had wanted and prepared for that meeting. He did so with grace and skill, but it came at a cost, knowing he would have to invite them again at a time that would create extra work for them. Sitting now on

the shore rather than in the centre of things, I felt ripples from leadership actions that I had not appreciated in the past. It was humbling, and helpful. Partly because of the barriers of power, leaders can quickly find themselves cut off from the intelligence they need. This is always a problem, but in a crisis, it can be disastrous.

In 2014, I was invited by Adam Grodecki to help him set up the Forward Institute. One of his core insights was that as you become more senior, your circles can narrow, and you need to make an effort to intentionally spend time with those who have different experiences and perspectives to you. His thesis is that responsible leadership requires more than gathering information about other people: Leaders should learn shoulder-to-shoulder with those from different sectors so that as new questions are explored together, they are examined from multiple perspectives. A pertinent example is the emergence of disruptive technologies. As we write this article, our social media feeds are alive with startling presentations on the power, potential and pitfalls of Artificial Intelligence, moving so fast that each seems to be outdated before it is completed. In such an environment, how could it be possible for any leader to think that their own personal experience, no matter how substantial and hard-won, is enough to see their organisation through the coming years?

This applies not only to leaders, of course, and is not only a function of seniority. My time working with some of the least powerful, most excluded people in Manchester around 30 years ago showed me that their circles could become incredibly narrow too. During that time, our research team included former beggars so we could work out how best to create routes out.

For understandable reasons, anyone who stopped begging for money and went through a successful detoxification programme to stop taking drugs, also stopped wanting to be with those who were still doing so. The young men left on the streets had a social circle in which every single person was doing the same things they were doing, and it was very difficult for them to enter a world with which they had no connection. Those who knew of someone similar to them who had turned their back on the addiction-begging cycle were much more likely to break free. Those who moved from begging to selling the *Big Issue* street paper[1] were even more likely to

[1] The Big Issue is a newspaper produced every week across the UK. It is sold on the streets by people who are transitioning from street living to permanent housing, as a means for them to earn an income in an environment that is familiar to them. It is published by an independent Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) called ‘The Big Issue’. The first author of this article was the Chief Executive of the Big Issue in the North from 1992-2000.

do so, not only because of the practical help offered but because of the access to others' perspectives.

The process of moving people from begging for money on the streets was not just about giving them access to a legitimate source of income selling the magazine. Until that point, the only people they had spent time with were social/charity workers, those in the criminal justice system, and other homeless people. It was no wonder their view of the world – and their role in it – was severely constrained. Putting them in daily conversational contact with their customers built bridging capital and started to shape their views and impact their own choices and behaviour. It worked the other way round too. Members of the public who had a regular vendor and even brief conversations with them were much less likely to think that those in poverty were solely responsible for their own circumstances. Engineering small but different social interactions started a process of moving people from a life of crisis into the possibility of a life in which they could thrive.

Back in the world of senior leaders also I have seen this process work. We organise an annual dinner for a dozen or so Army officers to help expose them to viewpoints they are unlikely to come across in the Officers' Mess or their own regiments. Creating the guest list for the Changemakers Dinner is one of our most enjoyable jobs as we combine different experiences and world views around the table. One year an Extinction Rebellion activist literally unglued herself from a pavement outside a government building in Whitehall just in time to come and eat with them.

Uncomfortable, hungry, un-showered, running high on nervous exhaustion after many hours of physical protest and confrontation with the police and some hostile members of the public, the young woman activist very understandably was not the most emollient dinner companion. At first, it was tense. The officers' usual charm had little effect in the face of her anger at their – and the wider establishment's and public's – lack of urgency. Yet, whatever they might have thought of her civil disobedience and disruptive tactics, her willingness to endure considerable physical hardship for a public interest cause made them pause for thought.

The next morning, we spoke with officers who were reflecting on the dissonance they felt. The growing climate crisis and tensions over increasingly scarce resources in the world is high on the list of strategic defence threats for this (as for every) nation. Risks of conflict over water, habitable living space and productive land are well documented. But how many Armies have a high priority plan for how they – as

significant consumers of fossil fuel and resources – take organisational responsibility for reducing the climate impact of their own activities? Could they be a bigger contributor to preventing the crisis, instead of just dealing with its consequences? As they shared a meal with someone consumed by passion about the need to understand the human impacts of it, the wider leadership responsibilities became more alive. The British Army, with significant contributions by some of those at that dinner, has since done considerable work on improving their own record on this.

Later that week I spoke with each of the civilian guests to see what they had learned from their dinner companions. The Extinction Rebellion activist told me it had disturbed some of her insulated thinking too: "When you invited me, I thought my job was to open their eyes to a world beyond their close circle. It was. I was sat next to not just one but two people who'd never heard of the concept of 'intersectionality'. At first, I was horrified at them, but then I realised that my world was a closed loop too. I literally don't know anyone who doesn't share my language, my assumptions and my analysis of how the world works. That's not good either."

It requires a fair amount of work to keep reaching beyond those who are like us, as Jon Yates explains in a blog accompanying his book Fractured (Yates, 2022):

> Half of graduates have no friends without degrees. Most pensioners know no one under 35 (apart from grandchildren). A fifth of Leavers and a quarter of Remainers[2] have no friends who voted the other way. Half of us have no friends from a different ethnic group. But our largest divide remains class. A British Barrister would have to invite 100 people round before inviting a single person who is unemployed. Most of our ideas of what most people think come from the people we surround ourselves with. That's why most rich people think they are about average in wealth and why most poor people think the same (Yates, 2021).

Some of the most impressive leaders I have worked with ensure they routinely spend time with those who are least powerful in their organisation. Why? Because they are the ones who must navigate the system and are forced to create workarounds when faced with unrealistic expectations or contradictory instructions and incentives. That is where the intelligence lies. Human error is often a symptom of trouble deeper inside the system, but our instinct can be to blame individuals. "Why didn't they just do what I told them to do?", we ask, "Is it wilful disobedience or do they need more

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[2] "Leavers and Remainers" is a reference to those in the UK who voted in 2016 to remain in or to leave the EU.

training?" Of course, people do make mistakes and poor choices, but leaders need to build observation skills and habits to notice when errors are systematic patterns and focus on the root cause. Spending time with those of lower ranks can also help the leaders restore the empathy that is at risk as they get promoted.

However, to be fruitful, this must be done in a rigorous and open-minded way. Looking at other people's lives can prompt reflection and revelation – but it can just as easily reinforce old prejudices. Similarly, an outsider's view on your working life might help you see it in a new light – but it could equally strike you as overly critical or naïve: both good enough reasons to reject it. One problem is that leaders are often praised for making quick assessments and decisions; however, this may not be the outcome of well-honed intuition, but of prejudice and anxiety. Therefore, central to developing responsible leadership is disciplined encounters with 'otherness'.

For example, at the Forward Institute, we offer a programme of Leadership Exchanges (Gosling & Western, 2017). A structured mutual research exercise that involves paired leaders spending several days observing each other and being observed; it deepens their insight into the styles, practices and the actual process of leadership in different organisations. Initially, some Exchange participants think that observation is such a natural aspect of life, that there is no need to think about its function or consider ways in which it might be enhanced. Is it really that easy, though? How much do we miss? What do we choose to see and what do we ignore, and how do we interpret the data we observe? What impact does this have on our decision-making and actions? These are questions that need serious consideration. Some of the people we work with on the Forward Institute Exchange programmes are amongst the country's most highly skilled professionals in various methods of observation and analysis: military intelligence officers, investigative teams in policing and justice, social scientists, process engineers, and human resources directors. Yet, even for them, it requires conscious effort to turn the mirror on themselves rather than using their astute skills to collate information on others.

The bigger the organisation the harder it can be to remain open to fresh perspectives. Wilful blindness (Heffernan, 2011) groupthink, rigid adherence and attachment to the already-invested-in, lead to both well-publicised ethical breaches as well as less well-known failures to grasp opportunities. Almost all of those we work with are household names and brands, often in the news and under the spotlight on a daily basis. Our experience is that organisations used to selling or defending themselves are not well designed for self-reflection.

In debriefings of the leadership exchanges, it has been repeatedly stated that one of the things people have helped each other with is recognising what is assumed as ordinary in their organisation is not necessarily normal for the world. Pausing to consider their own organisation with the benefit of an outsider's eyes allows them to remember that their automatic defaults were once choices, and thus could be chosen differently in the future. Considering their organisation's impact from the perspective of someone not in it – and with no axe to grind – allows them to see that the consequences of their decisions are not always what they had been aware of, and the impact is wider than they had appreciated.

Organisations can numb us; as part of keeping order and smoothing things out for the sake of efficiency and profitability. From the moment they recruit us because we will be a "good fit", through the induction that moulds us to its culture to the signals we get every day about what's going down well, and the explicit messages at annual appraisal time about what gets rewarded and promoted, they tell us all the time that the way things are done around here is the only real way things *can* be done. There can be an insistence on a language: jargon that shields us from the consequences. This numbing is dangerous.

How can we feel the 'ouch' of our leadership impact and respond, before we become either numb to it or the consequences become unbearable? It may not be easy to discern the signals of serious unease in lower ranks, and harder still to interpret them. But by careful listening, the more astute leaders create more responsive organisations. They also create resilience, vital sources of intelligence and a store of social capital that can make a crucial difference in a crisis.

While being receptive to the ideas of others, when we meet people with different experiences and views, we also have to create conditions in which they can speak freely to us. Several times I have been in a core team leading a response to nation-shaking events. Such responses require speed and complexity of reaction. Multiple organisations pull together to deal not only with the immediate incident but the reactions to it, requiring high levels of trust and the willingness to deal in staccato asks and stark language. Someone hiding crucial information because of their own pride, insecurity or fear can become a compounding factor that could be disastrous.

In this section, we talked about the distorting effects power has on us by restricting our own perspectives. However, the final idea above shows that being receptive alone is not enough. How other people respond to us also change when we

have power over them: People frequently do not tell us the truth, even if we repeatedly say, 'my door is always open'.

Inhibitor 2: Barriers to Communication

The second inhibitor to remove is the barrier to communication that power imposes. Here we are particularly talking about communication upwards – the capacity for others to speak and the leader to hear. Clarity of the leader's message is important too, and subject to many distortions and slips, but more easily addressed if the leadership team is not constantly in 'broadcast' mode.

One of the most underestimated skills is the ability to respond well to unwelcome news. So much is invested now in proactive communications training – how important announcements are made, how leaders tell their stories, TED-style, to engage others. It might have been better if more leaders took a training course on 'how to react'. It is the raised eyebrow, the impatience, the distain, even the anger in response to difficult reports that tells employees what a leader really thinks and values more than any scripted announcement ever can, and whether he or she actually does want to hear the inconvenient but important perspective or intelligence that is being communicated.

We would encourage leaders who want resilient organisations that can withstand crises to look afresh at their own cultures. They should ask independent outsiders to help with this, and ask questions such as: What do you regard as true loyalty? Is it fitting in or speaking up? If an employee disrupts your operations in the longer - or deeper- interests of the organisation and cause, would they be put on or off your 'high-potential' talent lists? What sort of team norms are there – and how explicit are they? What are the unspoken as well as the explicit 'rules' of how to get ahead around here? Do those norms include genuine diversity of thought, dissonance, and healthy disagreement?

The steeper the hierarchy the more carefully you have to attend to these potential inhibitors. However, it is also true that the stronger your culture, the more care this requires. Employees and suppliers carefully calculate the likelihood of efficacy and the risk of reprisal when speaking up. Senior officers in executive positions face the same dilemmas.

In secular liberal democracies, leaders must consider peer constraints as well as fear of seniority: What is the environment for saying something that is against the

majority view? This becomes particularly acute in values-based organisations or those where rallying around a shared cause is one of the motivating factors to joining the organisation. We are uneasy about any cause – however aligned to its aims we may be – that is so certain of itself that it declares ‘no debate is now needed’. Many organisations in the UK have found themselves in problematic situations due to this in recent years. If a workspace is ‘safe’ it cannot be because it protects people from hearing views that run counter to their own or to the consensus. The ‘safety’ must be because people with different opinions can respectfully explore and explain their reasoning even if it is initially hard for others to hear (who may never be persuaded or feel their colleagues’ views are ones that merit wider acceptance).

Speaking up with counter-cultural views can be hard for junior and senior staff alike. It is a topic on which they might wisely seek advice. One of us (Ruth Turner) has counselled many senior leaders preparing to raise questions that they feel are in the interest of both the organisation and society, but that would be disruptive or uncomfortable for both colleagues and those they are accountable to (ExCos, Boards, wider stakeholders). When rehearsing what is the worst that could happen and what is most likely to happen, they are generally less concerned about the chance of formal or career-limiting consequences. More often they worry about causing delay, disruption or distraction to colleagues – especially if there is a risk that their concerns turn out to be unfounded, or their intervention ineffective.

Emotional and psychological factors such as worry about embarrassment or being diminished in others’ eyes may be more frequently a barrier for speaking out than a fear of being punished or sacked. Finding a way to cope with the attention that comes from not going along with everyone else is crucial. For some, this could mean an unfamiliar breach in a practised professional demeanour – but sometimes it is necessary to be less ‘buttoned up’ when it comes to making a tough moral call.

Any organisation – from political parties to public services, humanitarian agencies to international banks – can find itself at the centre of an ethical scandal. When things go badly wrong, what happens, of course, is rarely a big leap from the good side into the dark side. In 2014-2015 Baroness Casey of Blackstock undertook an inspection of Rotherham Council in the UK, following an earlier damning report into how its children’s services dealt with at least 1,400 child sexual exploitation cases (Casey, 2015). The report found widespread failings across the council’s culture and services. She talked to some of our leaders after she had published the report, describing a situation that is analogous to the volume dial gradually getting turned up

little by little, so it is hard to notice the intensity increasing. Because each person only plays a very small part in that gradual shift, it gets normalised.

From the outside, it can be hard to believe someone who says that in several decades they never partook in or even witnessed bad behaviour. Yet from the experience of being inside organisations that have faced serious criticism, it is quite understandable that people would not perceive themselves as perpetrators of bad behaviour. The desire to belong is a crucial and functional aspect of organising. As Ruth Turner reflects, “Each time I have joined an organisation I have been aware of how quickly I want to become acclimatised, my desire to be an effective insider, of my insecurities and wish to impress. To understand and master the rules of the game. To defend an organisation’s efforts given restricted budgets and the immense pressure on it. To appreciate and rally around evidently struggling colleagues who seem to be doing their best under difficult circumstances”.

Developing a healthy tension between belonging and detachment is not easy, and your judgement can get warped if you do not have people, activities, ideas and ideals that provide moral and social ballast beyond what becomes normal in your organisation. The ‘right’ group for ensuring integrity is not necessarily one that shares all the same values and norms; it needs space for curiosity, re-examining, and dissent too.

Inhibitor 3: Stress and Overload

In stressful roles, being open to dissent is not easy. There is a very practical barrier: People are too busy and many are absolutely exhausted. Almost all organisational disasters are followed by someone saying: “I wanted to do the right thing… but there wasn’t a lot of time to think”.

More routinely, the issue of cognitive overload is a problem, especially when it becomes the norm amongst the people around a leader. Occupational health research shows that the cognitive impact of regularly getting too little sleep – i.e., being awake for 17 hours – is the equivalent of drinking enough alcohol to fail a drunk driving test (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health [NIOSH], 2020). A hard-work culture can be a little different from a hard-drinking culture, and equally irresponsible. There is a moral component to stretching yourself, and others, too thin.

Wayward leaders are not the only people posing huge risks for organisations. Some jobs are based around ‘stars’ who enjoy much autonomy. Investment banker

Kweku Adeboli incurred $2.3bn losses to his employer UBS in 2011 when he doubled down on bets in an attempt to cover investment losses (Fortado, 2015). On release from prison for illegal trading he spent time helping organisations learn from his situation. While never denying personal responsibility for his own actions, he has also opened up the discussion to look at some of the surrounding factors that are worth considering by all leaders and organisations. Among other things, he has talked about losing touch with his friends as he got caught up working all hours to succeed at the investment bank. He now says that those friends would have been horrified at what he started to do and that had he kept in touch, perhaps they would have reminded him that there were more important things – about himself and about the world – beyond this kind of success.

Our encouragement to leaders is to develop the habit of taking even a small amount of time regularly to reflect. Regular reflective practice in teams can help balance the decisive or even impulsive tendencies of the powerful, develop a more nuanced view of risk, allow leaders to consider consequences more fully, and empower others to contribute solutions and spot opportunities that might otherwise be missed. As elite athletes will tell us, pacing and allowing time for rest and recovery might seem luxurious, but is essential for building and improving the health of muscles; this is just as true for building organisational muscles and health.

Character as an Anchor in a Storm

When all else is uncertain, what certainty can you give?

In periods of great upheaval, we crave clarity from our leaders. Crisis is not the same as chaos, though chaos can make it all worse. In rapidly changing situations, even facts can be provisional as more information comes in from numerous sources, some confirming and some conflicting. It involves a continuous re-assessing of the situation, and judgements taken and revised against multiple criteria. Leaders have to make decisions based on a mixture of incomplete evidence and intelligence. Each decision then has a dynamic impact on the unfolding situation, sometimes unpredictably.

While there is no blueprint for leaders to follow or lay out, there is one aspect where certainty is vital: the values underpinning their leadership. Professor Veronica Hope Hailey studied the response of more than 130 senior leaders to the Covid-19 pandemic during 2020 and 2021 (Hope Hailey & Jacobs, 2022). Hope Hailey and

Jacobs (2022) found that in the absence of precedent or specific processes for such a global crisis, the only certainty they could provide was their personal integrity:

> Many talked about needing to fall back onto their personal sense of right and wrong. They spoke of a newfound humility, born out of not knowing the answers to problems and having to learn to listen intently to others. This was both surprising and reassuring. In the wake of the financial crisis, many commentators argued that we had developed the wrong type of leaders, devoid of integrity and a moral code. During the pandemic, the leaders we worked with revealed their integrity, what character scholars call 'true grit'.

Although every manual on crisis management talks about the need for strong central direction, in practice leadership can quickly become dispersed as the ability of the centre to respond rapidly and appropriately becomes outstripped by events. In these situations, the need for others to make pragmatic judgements consistent with strong values is essential. And the processes, business model and mechanics of the organisation need to support not undermine this.

To better understand the interaction between character development and culture in its broadest sense, the Forward Institute is working in partnership with Oxford University's Character Project on a three-year study that focuses on character, culture, and leadership in UK businesses. Led by Dr Ed Brooks, it is exploring the moral and intellectual ecosystem of an organisation, which it defines as "the environment in which people flourish (or falter) as wise thinkers and good leaders." As Brooks (2022) says:

> Character is shaped over time. It grows through a personal journey of repeated practice, observing role models, and reflection on experience. And it is shaped socially by people around us and patterns of institutional life, by the stories and spaces we inhabit. Character often grows most in the midst of difficulty.

We spend much of our time working with leaders of organisations that are carefully considering how to improve their culture. For some of them, it is because poor behaviour of their employees has become headline news. In the commentary around any organisation in this situation, you will find quotes about the need to support the decent majority and root out the badly behaved. The truth is much more painful than that: It is not always easy to separate people into those two neat groups. Whether vices or virtues come to the fore may be to do with a number of factors, and strength of individual character is by no means the only determinant. What gets

punished and what is rewarded, what is demanded and what is measured – all these contextual and structural factors at work can bring out the best or worst in anyone.

The process of vetting for a security-restricted role has attempted to reflect this. It is not just about checking how you have acted in the past, it is also about trying to ascertain from a wider set of references and data points how you might act when you are tested and tempted. A judgement about your ability to show integrity under pressure. Considering the interaction of character *and* context, the big question is, are you the 'right sort of person' *given what will happen to you*?

Our Context Shapes Our Character, So How Can We Shape Our Context?

From the point of view of a leader (or anyone, for that matter) context both shapes and is shaped by their actions (and inactions). Which aspects are taken as salient, which are prominent and which marginal, depends on the factors we have discussed above: what matters to the leader and the people around him or her. However, it is also the case that crises and complexities force themselves upon leaders with ever greater urgency. Leadership has always been hard; many claim it currently feels harder than ever (though this comparison is probably self-serving, given the turmoil and violence of previous centuries). Nonetheless, dilemmas and contradictory pressures abound. Leadership is not for the fainthearted. When you consider the scale and complexity of the technical, social, economic and political challenges it is surprising that anyone steps up to leadership at all.

Even in comparatively calm periods, with an organisation drawing as tight boundaries as it can around its scope of responsibility, the scale and range of concerns are beyond the capacity of anyone to command. Levels of interdependence – whether it relates to global supply chains, economic shocks, national security, or the emergence and control of pandemics – mean that almost everything is beyond our own control. In a crisis that becomes obvious, but, in fact, it is always the case. Given this reality, why is everyone not paralysed or defeated by the scale of the challenge of re-shaping and improving complex systems, when so little seems within their direct control?

Probably the most frequent conversation we have with leaders is working through where they can start to make a difference. Matthew Taylor, the Chief Executive of the NHS Confederation, advises 'thinking like a system, acting like an entrepreneur'.

Leaders must be clear on the system change they seek, then take an entrepreneurial approach of spotting possibilities for action. This requires creativity and iteration and working simultaneously through long- and short-term lenses. Systemcraft Institute director, Dr Kate Simpson says, in the face of seemingly intractable problems, it makes sense to seek opportunities to change not the immediate symptoms but the underlying dynamic. In that way, leaders are not just responding to the crisis in front of them but are also working on the deeper forces at play in order to re-shape the context which causes the crises in the first place.

Some years ago, I (Ruth Turner) was asked to create an intervention to support those who wanted to lessen the inter-religious violence plaguing northern Nigerians. We knew we had no sway with the most violent extremists – though others with responsibility for hard security could try. Analysis of data on the victims showed that significant numbers of Christians and Muslims were injured or killed in reprisals for the initial suicide attacks, and that this might be an area we could make a difference. So, we focused on responses to extremist attacks, rather than the perpetrators themselves. Over the following years, some extremely brave religious leaders in the parts of the states that faced the worst violence worked alongside tens of thousands of people in their local communities to change the tone of the response, ease tensions and reduce violence.

The power of most leaders derives from the authority of their position – and they find that is not enough. Budgets are constrained; the nature of the threat is constantly changing; the public is wary or outright hostile. No matter how powerful they might look from the outside – from the inside, often all they are aware of is what they *cannot* do, and the overwhelming scale of what they must respond to. That sense of owning power but feeling powerless is difficult psychologically. Therefore, having started talking about power, we want to finish by talking about vulnerability.

I (Ruth Turner) have often had a role in which I have had to spot the signs of hubris or insecurity in senior leaders and bring them back into the fold. When they are feeling on top of the world my job has been to gently remind them, they are human and fallible. When they are down, I have had to remind them of what they are capable of and why they are taking responsibility in the first place. Because, for sure, no one wants to be subjected to an angry, insecure, resentful or frustrated business, political or charity leader.

Leadership can only be understood in terms of relationships, not only with those close to one, but also with those who are somewhat further away in an organisation's

environment. Listen and observe. Reflect. Collaborate. Experiment. These are practices that may not *sound* powerful, but they can greatly reduce the resistance to what needs to be done.

Much of this is obvious. But simply because it is easy to describe does not mean it is easy to do. In telling leadership stories, we are encouraged to emphasise the crises, the heroic moments of intense struggle and dramatic outcomes. But it is not all like an action movie: leading is just as much like a soap opera, its never-ending daily episodes and multiple plot lines requiring continuity as much as change (Murphy & Gosling, 2022). Therefore, a leader's responsibility in the face of a tumultuous context is to ensure continuity of purpose, commitment, operations and probity; yet at the same time to discern opportunities to intervene in the flow of activity, even if to only slightly alter the flow of a public narrative, open doors to a new market, lobby for better policy. The objectives of such interventions may be parochial or more socially oriented (Kempster, 2022). So, whether a leader's contribution is assessed by reference to social benefits, market performance, aesthetic creativity, personal wealth, in victory and defeat, the question of legacy is always one of context.

Final Reflections

As authors, we are aware that the issues we raise in this article are embedded in the context in which we now work, where we assume that generally benign leaders are running largely functional organisations in a market-driven liberal democracy. However, this is surely not the experience of many of our fellow citizens. Post-colonial, feminist and related perspectives reveal clearly the far from benign effects of these companies and states. From some perspectives, the UK could certainly be seen as dominated by entrenched political and business elites, paternalistic governance, ethnic divides and deep-rooted assumptions about the legitimacy of hierarchical authority. While these are contested perspectives in the UK, they are even more contentious in many other parts of the world. We are not proposing a panacea for structural oppression: rather, we are realistic about the existence and power of business and state establishments and offer our reflections because we would prefer these to at least be enlightened elites.

We conclude this discussion with a brief review of the heuristic we introduced at the beginning: that leaders can and should attend to their own values (character), the company they keep and the way they frame, interpret and respond to the context.

What kind of model do we have in mind? This is not a ‘nested’ model, in which ‘character’ is contained within ‘company’, and both within ‘context’. Neither are we proposing a Venn-Diagram in which the overlap of all three might represent responsible leadership. Nor are we conceiving a linear model in which, for example, a particular context prompts the emergence of distinctive group cultures, each of which throw up leaders that represent the ‘character’ of that group. There may be merit in each of these potential models, but our approach is rather different, more oriented to thoughtful reflection than prescription. We see these three as juxtaposed constructs that can be mobilised in relation to each other to promote helpful reflection, critique and change.

So, for example ‘the company a leader keeps’ can be the source of support and challenge to help a leader make wiser decisions and to communicate more inclusively. But the company around a leader can also act as a constraint on diverse thinking, as in the example of Ruth Turner’s work with extremist groups in Nigeria, where strong in-group cultures reinforced the hatred of out-groups. Progress was made by creating a context that changed the inter-group relationships, allowing more flexible and inclusive aspects of leadership. Another example is Turner’s work as CEO of The Big Issue in the North, in which she describes people unable to mobilise a sense of their own power to change until they can see others who have made that same journey. Someone with the strength of character to return to provide that role-model can provide just the kind of leadership that enables an addict to take their own authority to revise ‘the company they keep’, to intentionally change their context. A third example is offered by Ruth Turner’s account of her years as an advisor to Prime Minister Tony Blair. A leader driven by conviction to promote contentious policy changes, in the midst of multiple and overlapping crises, can clearly benefit from advice and insight into parts of the wider system – the context – that are hidden from them. But equally, a leader with a capacity for hearing and being influenced by others may at times be captured by the loudest or most wily voices.

In short, responsible leadership is a complex accomplishment. There is no predictive model or cure-all prescription. To return at last the questions we posed at the start of this article, we can offer some partial answers:

(a) What leaders can and should do to form, strengthen and sustain the contributions of others to their leadership practice: they should pay particular attention to their reflective, observational and listening skills – put these systematically and intentionally into practice, with due regard to the company they

keep. (b) Subalterns, deputies or counsellors can assist a leader in this by reminding them, bringing them more than news from the margins – work for real engagement, but also recognise the tremendous stress and try not to add to this. (c) To develop the readiness and ability of leaders, subalterns, etc to work in this way, we propose they work on the relationship between character, company and context.

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The Authors

This 'Expert Viewpoint' was co-authored by two global experts on leadership training and research:

Ruth Turner is a director of the Forward Institute, an institute that works with powerful leaders and companies to build a movement for responsible leadership, which she helped to set up in 2015. Previously, she has worked as a senior advisor to Tony Blair as Prime Minister, led the Faith Foundation, served as Director of Government Relations in No 10 and has worked extensively with Cabinet Ministers, CEOs, public health experts, scientists, artists, inventors, religious extremists, and global sports stars.
Email: ruth.turner@forward.institute

Jonathan Gosling is an Emeritus Professor of the in the Business School of the University of Exeter. An acclaimed scholar in leadership, he has published in the Harvard Business Review, Sloan Management Review, Leadership, Management Learning, Academy of Management Learning and Education, among many other high-impact journals, and has authored several well received books and textbooks on leadership. Professor Gosling advises several companies, international agencies and government departments on their leadership-related issues and is a faculty member on the Forward Institute's 'responsible leadership programme'. He is a Fellow of the Leadership Trust Foundation, Trustee of the JH Levy Trust, a co-director of the European Leadership Centre, and a director of Coaching Ourselves Inc.
Emai: Jonathan.Gosling@exeter.ac.uk

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