ABSTRACT

A review of the leadership literature reveals that the understanding of construction leadership is somewhat primitive, failing to consider the relatively mature developments of mainstream leadership theories. Furthermore, there is a contemporary debate in mainstream literature that points to the need to examine the development of leaders from broader sociological, psychological, historical and political perspectives, rather than current emphasis on managerial functionalism. The present study involved in-depth interviews with fifteen leading figures of the UK construction industry in an attempt to address this research gap. Preliminary findings found that two issues help shape and drive a leader in the industry. First, there appears to be tipping points in the lives of the leaders interviewed, manifested in key events, people or places that had a great impact in their lives. Second, leaders are motivated strongly by a passion for pursuing personal agenda.

KEYWORDS: Inter-disciplinary, Leadership, Passion, Tipping Point, Value System.

1. INTRODUCTION

The field of leadership is well researched; most leadership theories and models that are still being discussed today have evolved from the scholarly work of the 1950s and 1960s (see e.g. Tannenbaum and Schmidt, 1958; Blake and Mouton, 1964; Fiedler, 1967) into understanding characteristics
that enable individuals to become leaders (often perceived as people with authority) or to display leadership techniques (see Fairholm, 2004). Over the last decade, there has been a resurgence of interest in the study of leadership, in part due to wider recognition of the dynamic, changing business environment and the need for organisations to innovate constantly. Indeed, writers like Hammer and Champy (2001) talk of the need for new types of leaders to champion the cause of innovation.

Despite the wealth of knowledge built around the concept of leadership, there are scholars who contend that the understanding of leadership has not been fully developed (de Vries and Manfred, 1997). As this paper unfolds, it is suggested that the application of leadership studies in the realm of construction management remains somewhat primitive. Ongoing research is therefore reported here that seeks to broaden the application of leadership theory in construction. The paper is organised as follows: a review of the concept of leadership is first presented, which reveals a need for a deeper examination of the values and belief systems that shape the development of leaders; the methodology involving in-depth interviews with 15 leaders in the UK construction industry is then outlined before concluding with an analysis of what makes a leader in construction.

2. LEADERSHIP THEORIES AND APPLICATION IN CONSTRUCTION

According to Berry et al. (2000), “the practice and study of leadership has been, is, and will be a continuing fascination for leaders and academics (p. 348)”. However, as Kotter (1990) observed, “[leadership] is not the province of a chosen few”. In a recent systematic review published by the Advanced Institute of Management Research (AIM) in the UK, Munshi et al. (2005) maintained that “[…] leaders are important at all levels in the organisation (p. 6)”. Munshi et al. (2005) considered leaders to perform two key roles: that of motivating others into uncharted terrains (see Hammer and Champy, 2001; Morrell and Capparell, 2001) and to design organisational systems that enable employees to be innovative. In this respect, the concept of leadership is different from the study of management.

Several writers have considered this distinction. Kotter (1990), for instance, suggested that “[…] management is about coping with complexity […] leadership, by contrast, is about coping with change”. In a similar vein, Grint (2005) contrasted: “[…] the division between Management and Leadership, rooted in the distinction between known and unknown, belies the complexity of the relationship between problem and response. Oftentimes the simple experience of *déjà vu* does not lend itself to the application of a tried and tested process because it is really ‘*déjà vu all over again*’ (p. 1472)”. Fairholm (2004) put it simply, “[…] if you can count it, you can control it, you can program it, and therefore, you can manage it. If you cannot count it, you have to do leadership (p. 578)”.


None the less, Fairholm (2004) suggested that “some still may not see a distinction (ibid.)”. Indeed, critics have argued that the blurring of boundaries between leadership and management is due to the dominance of functionalism in management research. For Berry et al. (2000), “[throughout the early development of leadership theories […] the ontology was realist and the epistemology was functionalist […] these also fit with the managerial functionalism of Henri Fayol (p. 344)”. They added, “The criterion for effectiveness is still the functional effectiveness of the leader’s behaviour […] yet Fayolian functionalism and structural functionalism have been in critical retreat for decades (ibid.)”. At this point, it is therefore, pertinent to trace the development of contemporary leadership theories and examine its adoption in construction management research.

**2.1 DEVELOPMENT OF LEADERSHIP THEORIES**

Munshi et al. (2005) suggested there are five clusters of leadership theories: traits and styles; contingency; transformational/transactional; distributed and structuralist leadership theories. Early leadership theorists have been concerned with discovering the traits and styles that leaders possess (see Stogdill, 1950, 1974; Covey, 1990; Yukl, 2005), believing that these characteristics are what differentiates leaders from followers. However, sceptics such as Wright (1996) have indicated that these characteristics do little in predicting whether people who possess such traits will necessarily become leaders. Indeed, as Fairholm (2004) stated, “[…] studying individual leaders may not get you to a general understanding of leadership […] leadership is something larger than the leader – that leadership encompasses all there is that defines who a leader may be (p. 579)”. Subsequently, a strand of leadership theories emerged that considered the context in which leadership is practised. Proponents of the contingency approach (see Tannenbaum and Schmidt, 1958; Blake and Mouton, 1964; Fiedler, 1967) subscribe to the view that any leadership response is dependant on the particular situation which warrants that response.

Contemporarily, the contingency approach has received some criticism. Grint (2005), for example, argued that “the difficulty of separating the situation from the leaders [is] because the former is often the consequence of the latter (p. 1490)”, rather than the other way round. Grint (2005) used the analogy of the Trojan Horse to illustrate this by claiming that “the appearance of the wooden horse outside the walls of Troy did not require the Trojans to bring the horse inside the wall, they chose to do it”, and added, “This reassertion of the role of choice in the hands of leaders does not imply […] they are determined in the actions by the situations they find themselves in (ibid.)”.

Culture and power relations often run alongside the study of leadership. Burns (1978) examined the leader-follower relationship and
differentiated between transactional and transformational leadership. The former relates to the rewards-punishment (‘carrot-and-stick’) framework that influences the behaviour of followers; and the latter points towards the emphasis on the effective articulation and communication of vision through such attributes as charisma (Strange and Mumford, 2002). Wright (1996), however, observed that analysing the effectiveness of transformational leadership is virtually impossible due to the subjectivities involved in personal styles.

Questioning the conventional leader-follower dichotomy, distributed leadership theorists like Gronn (2002) and Spillane (2006) have suggested that new forms of work organisation have resulted in greater interdependence and coordination, which in turn gives rise to the need for more distributed leadership practice. Supported by examples in the education sector, Spillane (2006) argues that “[…] teachers are not always influenced by the efforts of their principals and assistant principals [leaders] to transform the status quo (p. 11)”. Given the trend towards more self-management, distributed leadership theorists maintain a need to consider leadership at all levels of the organisation (Munshi et al., 2005).

Organisational systems feature prominently in structuralist leadership theories. Popular writers like Senge (1990) talk of the need for leaders to engage in systems thinking when designing organisational learning environments to deal with the ever-changing business climate. Huff and Möslein (2004) suggest that a crucial role of leaders is to design organisational structures that facilitate effective distribution of resources. Leaders, in Munshi’s et al. (2005) terms, fulfil the role of “architects in an administrative sense (p. 6)”.

However, structuralist leadership theorists have now begun to consider the dynamic interactions of the people who are being subjected to the organisational systems designed by ‘leaders’, echoing the contemporary sociological debate on dualism. For example, Collinson (2005) draws on the work of scholars like Giddens (1984) to consider interdependent relationships between leaders and followers. Collinson (2005) contends that “[…] followers’ practices are frequently proactive, knowledgeable and oppositional […] and that leaders themselves may engage in workplace dissent (p. 1419)”, reinforcing shifting power relations that is akin to the distributed leadership perspective.

### 2.2 APPLICATION OF LEADERSHIP THEORIES IN CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

In many respects, the adoption of leadership theories in construction has been somewhat primitive when compared with the relatively mature development of mainstream leadership literature summarised in the preceding subsection. Many leadership studies in the field of construction management research have been concerned with examining effectiveness
in relation to organisational performance. For example, Odusami et al. (2003) through analysing data collected from 60 questionnaire surveys from project leaders in various professions investigated the relationship between project leadership and construction project performance. The attributes of project leadership found in Odusami’s et al. (2003) survey instrument originated from the four leadership styles (shareholder, autocrat, consensus and consultative) developed by Slevin and Pinto (1988; see also Lewin et al., 1939 and White and Lippitt, 1960).

In understanding the role of leadership in promoting construction innovation, Nam and Tatum (1997) interviewed more than 90 construction professionals involved in 10 innovative projects that took place in the US in the late 1980s and concluded effective leadership implied the need for leaders who are technically competent entrepreneurs who can drive forward innovation. In a similar vein, McCabe et al. (1998) examined the nature of leadership in the management of quality. These studies tend to support the traits and styles strand of leadership theories, and augment the emphasis on managerial functionalism observed by Berry et al. (2000).

Of course, culture plays an important role in the study of construction leadership. For example, Low (1995) contrasted Eastern and Western philosophies to discuss the relevance of the teachings of Chinese philosophy, Lao Tzu, in construction project leadership. Low (1995) suggested, “[...] while modern project management is dynamic and proactive, the Tao Te Ching [Lao Tzu’s Philosophy] is passive”, adding that it is important for leaders to sometimes “sit back and wait for events to unfold (p. 301)”. Following the Eastern theme, Fellows et al. (2003) also investigated leadership styles and power relations in quantity surveying in Hong Kong. Other behavioural research into construction leadership include Dainty et al. (2002), who discussed the essence of leadership in empowerment within the UK construction sector.

There is no doubt that these studies provide illuminating insights into leadership in construction. However, the emphasis remains narrowly focussed on the performance agenda and does not consider the development of leadership theories mentioned earlier. There is indeed a need to move the examination of leadership in construction forward and this is the intention of the work reported in this paper. The next section will highlight some of the emerging issues to take this forward.

2.3 LOOKING FORWARD BUT LEARNING FROM THE PAST

The observation provided by Berry et al. (2000) that research on leadership has hitherto concentrated narrowly on managerial functionalism and the effectiveness agenda is indeed true for studies undertaken in the area of leadership in construction. In fact, Fairholm (2004), drawing on Burns (1978) argues more forcefully, “Researchers have denigrated the idea of leadership […] because they misunderstand the evolving nature of
authority derived from changing social structures, and because they have missed opportunities to tie in research procedures and focuses from intellectual interests such as psychology, sociology, history and political science, not just scientific management, Weberian bureaucracy, and the like (p. 578).

Berry et al. (2000) pose a further question, “How then do persons become leaders?” and add, “From early constructions that leaders were born and schooled in a given social class via constructions of entrepreneurs as leaders, the literature has been opaque upon the actual process of leader formation (p. 347).”

Indeed, Cooper et al. (2005) suggested that before one looks into developing authentic leaders, one needs to learn from the past of the individual (see Toor and Ofori, 2006 for recent embryonic work investigating leadership antecedents in construction). As Samuel Taylor Coleridge beautifully penned, “If men could learn from history, what lessons it might teach us! But passion and party blind our eyes, and the light which experience gives is a lantern on the stern, which shines only on the waves behind us!” This present research attempts to plug the gap by examining the past lives of leaders in UK construction to better understand their underlying values and belief systems that influence their current practice and thoughts on the future.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The research reported here forms part of a wider study aimed at establishing construction future scenarios from the personal perspectives of leading figures in the UK construction industry. A broad definition of ‘leader’ as people with influence (see Stogdill, 1950) in UK construction was used to identify potential subjects for investigation. Therefore, the identification of leaders was not only confined to those who were in positions of authority. So, from the profile of leaders interviewed depicted in Table 1.1 below, Participant J was a TV presenter who created a television programme that positively transformed the perceptions of the general public towards the built environment. Due to time constraints, a total of fifteen leaders were interviewed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Type of Organisation</th>
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<td>A</td>
<td>Secretary General</td>
<td>Trade Union</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>Chair</td>
<td>Construction company</td>
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<td>C</td>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Professional institution</td>
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<td>D</td>
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<td>E</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>Professional institution</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Construction-related enabling body</td>
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<td>G</td>
<td>CEO</td>
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<td>H</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>Architectural practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>TV Presenter and Editor-at-Large</td>
<td>Construction-related media</td>
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Methodological inspiration was drawn from work undertaken by Cooper and Thompson (1984). In this study, Cooper and Thompson (1984) were interested in examining how famous women juggled between their professional and personal lives through in-depth interviews about their personal and career history and an exposition of their personal drivers and motivations. The present study adopted this framework. In-depth interviews lasting between 2 and 3 hours were undertaken with the fifteen leaders, which cover questions including their personal and career history, linked to their thoughts about the past, present and future of the construction industry. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using template analysis (King, 1998).

4. EMERGENT FINDINGS

This section summarises some of the key emergent findings extracted from the analysis.

4.1 THE TIPPING POINTS: PEOPLE, PLACES AND EVENTS

From the analysis of the interview data, it became apparent that three critical leadership antecedents (see Toor and Ofori, 2006) tend to stand out, including people, places and events that contribute to the shaping of our leaders in question.

It is commonly accepted that the construction industry is extremely paternalistic and many writers have alluded to the power of family relations in encouraging new entrants into the industry (see Chan and Connolly, 2006). So, it is unsurprising to extract this same phenomenon from the leaders interviewed. For example, Participant D who now leads the research and development unit of a global engineering consultancy, speaks fondly of his grandfather, “My grandfather was an inventor [...] he studied what we could call civil engineering in the broadest sense [...] and he also studied geology and I think he probably had a big influence on my life or my time spent with him. When I was a young lad, I worked as an apprentice carpenter on weekends and in the summertime for about five or six years [...] Then, I went to university to study and get a double major in, two degrees in Geology and Civil Engineering at Vanderbilt University in Nashville Tennesse”.

Participant E was perhaps less forthright about the part his father played in encouraging him to become an architect, but nonetheless
remarked, “And maybe my father, subliminally. Although my father wasn’t telling me to be an architect, I think he always showed a great interest in buildings […] and he was, he could draw very well […] a he was also a very good craftsman too. He was an excellent craftsman […] joinery and cabinet making”

For Participant N, his father even has a lasting impact on the way he manages his group of construction companies today. “[...] I can always remember about my father, was that he never ever upset a customer. To him, the principle that the customer is always right applied. And I learnt the… the lesson I got out of that was that the client is the most important part of the company, because no matter how good you are, no matter how many good people you have, without a client, you will have no business to start with. The second thing is that really you have to look after your staff, be they the cleaners or be they your Gods… sorry the directors… you must look after them, you have to pay them well etc. because again, you can have the best clients on Earth because you are good with clients, you haven’t got good people, you’re finished”.

However, whilst family members play a part in promoting the industry to the interviewees during their formative years, virtually all interviewees claim that no one individual could take the credit for influencing their current professional practice. For all the interviewees, it is a range of people that have crossed their paths at various stages of their career that collectively moulds their personal character and thoughts about their work.

So, Participant A talks about how his late predecessor in the trade union was passionate about ensuring a place for employee voice; Participant D recalls how his architect friends at university transform his views about design beyond just engineering drawings; and Participant Q even sung praises for his wife who is also his partner in business.

Indeed, Participant K aptly sums up the importance of people as a leadership antecedent, “A huge range of people, and there is no individual that I would say I’d learnt everything from, or who’d inspired me most. I mean it’s a very wide group of people, including great engineers, great architects, people who’ve headed construction, major construction contractors, people who have been inspired clients, and there is a wide range it would be invidious to name individuals. But I’ve been impressed by the quality of the people that I have met, in all of those disciplines, and their commitment and dedication and it’s certainly been my ambition that they can work more effectively together rather than reverting to the old adversarial culture that sadly damaged the industry so much in the past”.

Geography plays a crucial part in our interviewees’ thinking as well. This is natural given the physical and transient nature of construction work where the essence of place plays a more prominent role when compared to other industries. So, Participant G remembers his childhood spent in deprived parts of Northern England and his reception when his family moved to a relatively richer are in the West of the country, which
intrinsically drives him to work in the broad area of housing and social regeneration.

For Participant P, the exposure to the industrial landscape of Manchester and Liverpool inspired him to pursue the expedition of refurbishing the many derelict industrial buildings in that region. Similarly, Participant E fell in love with the city of Bristol whilst studying at University and has since been passionate about preserving the character of English towns and cities.

Thirdly, but not the least, critical events during the personal and career lives of our interviewees contribute to the way they think about the world around them too. So, Participant N, a Greek by upbringing who was raised in Egypt, considered the Suez Canal crisis in the late 1950s to be a major turning point in his life: 

"[...] the influence came from Gamal Abdel Nasser. You know the revolution in Egypt? The Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, when I was in Egypt and when I left Egypt, was supposed to be a dictator who was suppressing all foreigners in Egypt at that time [...] When I was in Egypt, I never saw people killing anybody [...] That was a major event for me [...] It must have been. Because of this, what I saw in Europe, what I started doing was to read the newspapers backwards, in Battersea library funny enough. I used to spend hours and hours and I was reading what the English papers were writing about Egypt when I was living in Egypt and I thought, “God, they must be writing from another country!” because I didn’t experience it. How the foreigners were being persecuted. Nobody persecuted us, or my friends, or my family. So, I started realising that there is a game here. I was an innocent kid that thought life goes on normally".

Indeed, Participant N remains sceptical on any official reporting and cynical of governmental initiatives to this day.

In a similar vein, Participant A recollects growing up in Glasgow in Scotland during the decline of the shipbuilding industry and remembers the associated job losses and strike action in the 1970s, which perhaps motivated his life-long endeavours in the trade union movement. However, not all interviewees necessarily share these political dimensions. For Participants G and K, the major events that led to their current position related to a major career break in their professional lives. As Participant G remarked, “I had my big break. Basically, if it hadn’t been for my big break, I would have, you know, I don’t think I’ll be here today... because, which was I got a phone call from Richard Rogers and he basically said, “I’ve got a proposition for you. I’ve read your work, I’ve seen, you know, some of the things you’ve done and would you be willing to come and be Secretary of my Urban Taskforce?” and I spoke to Price WaterhousCoopers and they released me, on secondment for until after Christmas and to produce what you’ve probably seen before, produced this [...] Towards an urban renaissance which I ghosted”. Participant K was instrumental in the decision-making process at the governmental level for the Channel Tunnel project in the UK.
4.2 I started and so I’ll finish?

It is interesting to observe that some of our interviewees display a preference for starting up projects, rather than completing them. In an industry typified by transience and the need to move on from project to project, the generation of ideas seem to appeal to our leaders more than the implementation. As Participant D acknowledged, “I’ve always worked, I’ve always worked more upfront. Right? And I’ve known about how things are done, but I’m more of a starter than a completer. So, I enjoy that creative starting and trying to interpret and putting the pieces of the puzzle out on the table”.

Participant H even considers the generation and testing of ideas to be of a higher order than mere implementation, as he suggested, “Well, you can only do so much... that’s the problem with the industry. We are rapidly running out of time. You see, you have to develop the theory, you need to come up with the technical solutions and ideas and you have to test them out, and then you have to design the buildings, you have to survive as an architect, so in order to do that much in one lifetime, you know... So I sort of oscillate, if you like, between developing new ideas, trying to find out how they can work technically [...] That is the biggest problem, because contractors are profit-driven, whereas architects have a higher goal, a higher vision, a higher esteem”.

None the less, in an industry that is as diverse as construction where opportunities in both ideas generation and implementation are always available, the challenge of seeing through ideas is certainly tempting for our interviewees. For instance, Participant D recalls the time when he was invited as an external assessor of a degree programme in Hong Kong and was latterly invited to implement some of his recommendations, “We made recommendations and then about a month later the question came back and I said, “We like your recommendations. Would you like to come, would you be prepared to come and implement them?” [...] I said, “Yes.” And so, I took a leave of absence from the University of Oregon and went to Hong Kong for one year [because] I looked at this as a very interesting opportunity, not just to think about what you could do, but to do it”.

5. PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

As mentioned previously, this work is part of a wider study into identifying future scenarios for the UK construction sector. Arguably, in order to gain a better understanding of the future development of the sector, it is extremely pertinent to gain deeper insights about the people who ‘lead’ the industry. This paper therefore attempted to offer a snapshot into the past of our chosen leaders. The salient review of leadership research at the beginning has, however, highlighted that studies undertaken in construction leadership are somewhat limited. The paper presented some preliminary
findings from a series of interviews undertaken with fifteen leaders in the UK construction industry. The emergent findings point to the elicitation of critical leadership antecedents of people, places and events that shape the thinking of our leaders. It was also suggested some of our leaders tend to prefer the role of starters rather than completers. Such desire to move on from one idea to the next probably accounts for the fact that these leaders tend to be connected to a wide range of people in their journey of learning. In terms of further work, it is expected that the analysis presented here will be linked to the leaders’ perceptions of the future development of the UK construction sector.

6. REFERENCES


