RESEARCHING LEADERSHIP FOR COLLABORATIVE ADVANTAGE

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores leadership in inter-organizational collaborative contexts where the aim is to achieve synergistic gains known as Collaborative Advantage (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). It reviews relevant literature on leadership including the theory of collaborative advantage and extant research on constructionist relational and collective leadership. It reports on empirical research undertaken in the context of a UK public sector children’s services; a context characterized by turbulence, austerity and now Brexit. It develops four ‘relational leadership dimensions’ relevant to collaborative context. These dimensions arise in the interface between: sectoral contexts; partner organizations and the collaboration; the collaboration and service users, and the individual leader and the collaboration. It concludes with some thoughts on methodological challenges for empirical research in collaborative contexts.
INTRODUCTION

“How do you lead in circumstances where you’ve got this huge amount of change going on, there’s huge uncertainty, these big structural shifts going on in society?” .... and “more participative and democratic leadership styles are likely to be more effective at delivering change and improvement” (Ben).

“It’s been a very changing landscape ... the skills that you started with aren’t necessarily the skills that you need” and “keeping those relationships with the partners going and working at that ... and nurture it... It doesn’t live by itself” (Alison).

“sometimes you have to meander a little bit in order to get on the right road” (Fiona).

These kind of comments are typical of those made by individuals who practice collaborative leadership in today’s rapidly changing, interconnected, shared-power world (Crosby and Bryson, 2005). Yet empirical research focusing specifically on leadership in inter-organizational, cross-sector contexts is not extensive, not compared to that focusing on leadership in and of organizations at any rate. Nevertheless, as collaboration between independent public, private and non-profit organizations is essential to addressing major issues facing society today, leadership in these contexts is receiving more attention. In these kinds of inter-organizational collaborative contexts, the issues on which leadership is focused are typically multi-faceted and interdisciplinary in nature. Hence, they are located in the inter-organizational domain (Trist, 1983) beyond the reach and responsibility of any single organization to tackle effectively on its own. Leadership as such is not situated within a single organizational hierarchy with stipulated lines of authority and positional power, but sits typically in a context of interacting organizational hierarchies and social structuring. Likewise, individual leaders may not hold positional authority, may include stakeholders who are not even directly involved in the collaboration and representatives from stakeholder
groups and whole organizations. Many individual leaders are likely to bring diverse resources, experiences, and professional expertise to the collaboration.

That leadership in inter-organizational contexts differs from that in intra-organizational ones is clearly evident. The complexity of problems, the lack of traditional hierarchy, and the shared responsibility for outcomes point to collective and relational dimensions of leadership (e.g. Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Murrell, 1997; Ospina and Foldy, 2015; Uhl-Bien, 2006) and to leadership that goes beyond the exclusive focus on the individual leader (Huxham and Vangen, 2000a; Ospina and Hittleman, 2011; Ospina and Uhl-Bien, 2012; Vangen and Huxham, 2003). Notwithstanding a few notable exceptions (see also Crosby and Bryson, 2005; Sullivan et al, 2011), there is a clear lack of empirical research focusing in leadership aimed at addressing societal issues in the inter-organizational domain. Thus it would appear that there is a need for more empirical research to inform both the theory and practice of leadership in collaborative contexts.

To that end, this paper aims to make a contribution to knowledge on leadership in inter-organizational collaborative contexts where the aim is to achieve synergistic gains known as Collaborative Advantage (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). It is relevant to working arrangement of varying degrees of formality between independent, legally autonomous organizations. It involves individuals working together across organizational, professional, sectoral and sometimes national boundaries. Many organizations are involved in many such collaborations simultaneously, and these will vary in significance with reference to partner organization’s core remit. This paper includes empirical research focusing on ‘collaborative leadership’ enacted by individuals in a context of austerity and turbulence; a context where the requirement to do more with less challenges individuals and their organisations to tackle cross-cutting societal challenges in increasingly efficient ways (Diamond and Vangen, 2017).
The paper begins with a brief review of the theory of collaborative advantage and related theories focusing specifically on leadership conceptualizations of relevance to collaborative contexts. It then provides an overview of the empirical research and reports on preliminary findings. In particular, it proposes four relational leadership dimensions of relevance to leadership in collaborative contexts. It finishes with a brief comment on the complexity of research in collaborative context and the preliminary status of the research findings. The review of literature and the findings of the current empirical research suggest that there is merit in conducting further research drawing on the theory of collaborative advantage and research on constructionist relational and collective leadership.

COLLABORATIVE ADVANTAGE AND RELATED THEORIES

This paper takes as its starting point, the theory of collaborative advantage (TCA) (Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Vangen and Huxham, 2014) and research applying a constructionist lens to relational leadership (CRL) (Ospina and Uhl-Bien, 2012; Ospina and Sorenson, 2006) and collective leadership (Ospina and Foldy, 2015).

The theory of collaborative advantage is an evolving practice-oriented theory about collaboration (Vangen and Huxham, 2014). It has developed over two decades from research-oriented action research (RO-AR) and other forms of engaged research. It has involved a large number of interventions in a large variety of contexts - from simple two-party collaborations to major international networks. It has involved individuals responsible for directing collaborations, as well as representatives of organizations and other stakeholder groups. The collaborations have addressed a range of areas included health, education, anti-poverty, substance abuse, community development and planning, area generation, children
services, community action, career development, policing, economic development and many more.

From these RO-AR interventions, practitioners have gained insight through exploring issues of genuine concern to them at a time when it was relevant to them (Eden and Huxham, 2006). Similarly, the interventions have yielded a vast amount of empirical data from which theoretical conceptualizations have been developed in an emergent and incremental fashion. While the development of the TCA is an ongoing endeavour, it continues to be structured around a tension between Collaborative Advantage (the idea that synergy can be created through joint collaborative working) and Collaborative Inertia (capturing the tendency for collaboration to be slow to produce output or uncomfortably conflict ridden). It is also structured in overlapping themes—including goals, trust, power, culture, communication, leadership, governance, identity and membership structures—identified as signaling particular challenges for those who seek to govern, lead, and manage collaborations in practice.

With regards to developing the theoretical conceptualizations, the aim is to expose the complexity inherent in collaborative situations and the resulting challenges that are intrinsic to them. As the intention is to develop practice-oriented theory, a further aim is to capture implications for practice as an integral part of the theoretical conceptualizations. Thus, the conceptualizations are presented in a non-prescriptive manner that informs both theory and practice. Importantly then, the idiosyncratic nature of actual collaborative situations is recognized as is the idea that there are tradeoffs between positive and negative sides to alternative ways of managing. Ultimately, the TCA provides conceptualizations and frameworks that can be used as “handles to support reflective practice” (Huxham and Beech, 2003).
Collaborative Advantage: Leadership conceptualizations

Earlier work on the TCA yielded a specific definition of leadership as being concerned with ‘making things happen’ in situations where a single entity (be it an individual, a group, or an organization) cannot take on a challenge alone (Huxham and Vangen, 2000a; Vangen and Huxham, 2003). Importantly, that definition grew out of research on collaboration rather than research on leadership. The aim of the research was to make a contribution to theory on collaboration rather than theory on leadership. Arising out of the practice-oriented focus of the research, data collection and analysis focused on ‘mechanism that lead a collaboration’s policy and activity agenda in one direction rather than another’ (Huxham and Vangen, 2000a, 1165). Note that while that definition focused on the outcome of activity, the work challenged traditional notions of leadership tied to individuals. Instead, the research led to a more holistic view of leadership as incorporating all elements that influence the way in which collaborative agendas are shaped and enacted. It found that the media instrumental in shaping and implementing collaborative agendas – and through which leadership is enacted - include not only the behavior of individuals, but also the structures and processes of a collaboration.

This early conceptualization of leadership has two parts; the first identifies three media through which agendas are shaped and driven forward and the second identifies activities that participants enact to actively drive the agenda forward. In terms of the media, the conceptualization suggests that structures and processes are as important as are the individual leaders in moving a collaboration forward. The media structure refers to the partners involved in a collaboration and the relationship between them. Partners can be other collaborations, organizations, groups or individuals. Structure is a leadership media because it determines for example, who can have an active influence on shaping the agenda, who has
power to act and how resources may be accessed by the partners. The media *processes* refer to the formal and informal instruments via which partners communicate. Like structures, these are significant as they determine the way in which partners can, jointly or otherwise, drive the agenda forward. The media, *participants* refer to individuals involved with the collaboration as well as the representatives of other collaborations, organizations and groups, who have power and expertise to influence and enact the collaboration’s agenda.

Importantly, all the three leadership media—structures, processes, and participants—are to a large extent outside of the immediate control of the individuals and organizations that are partners in the collaboration. Structures and processes often impose upon or emerge from the activities of the collaboration, and many of the participants who influence and enact the collaborative agenda are not necessarily “partners”. To add to this complex picture of leadership, as suggested by earlier research, collaborations are notoriously dynamic to the extent that structures, processes, and participants tend to be changing perpetually (Huxham and Vangen, 2000b).

All three media are important to an overall understanding of leadership in collaborative situations. Leadership as it is *enacted by individuals* is considered within the *context* of the leadership influences of structures, processes and participants. While individuals who lead are often thwarted by tensions to the extent that outcomes are not as they anticipated, they nevertheless affect the outcomes of a collaboration (Vangen and Huxham, 2003).

The second part of the leadership conceptualization—which is concerned with activities that participants enact to actively drive the agenda forward—found a tension between ideology and pragmatism in the activities of leaders of collaborations. In essence, it suggests that much of what is done by those who try to make things happen is undertaken in
the spirit of collaboration. Activities tend to be highly facilitative and concerned with embracing, empowering, involving and mobilizing partners. While not unproblematic to enact in practice, these activities implies much facilitative activity suggesting the need for relational leadership skills such as patience, empathy, honesty and deference. On the other hand, the research also found a need for more authoritative leadership involving the manipulation of agendas and politicking (Vangen and Huxham, 2003)

These kinds of activities, the research found, is necessary to avoid inertia and move the collaboration forward. When done thoughtfully, the argument goes, these kinds of activities represent a positive and effective mode of leadership. Thus, effective leaders, in collaborative contexts, appear to operate from both perspectives – in the spirit of collaboration and towards collaborative thuggery. Importantly, this conceptualization highlights and legitimates the simultaneous enactment of both a facilitative and a directive leadership role. As with any conceptualization that emphasizes the paradoxical nature of collaboration (Vangen, 2016), both roles are essential in making things happen and should not be seen as alternative ways of leading but rather as alternative aspects of a leadership portfolio. The research suggests that successful leaders operate from both perspectives and have the ability to switch between them, often carrying out both types of leadership in the same act.

Relational and collective leadership

Interest in relational leadership in general (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006) and the application of the constructionist lens to relational leadership (CRL) in particular has increased in relevance and popularity lately. The ‘constructionist argument’ advocates a redirection of research towards seeing leadership as collective and relational, and
with more focus on context and relationship (Ospina and Uhl-Bien, 2012). This argument clearly has much in common with the leadership conceptualizations pertaining to collaborative advantage as summarized above. In essence, it shows leadership as a relational process and the enactment of leadership by individuals as taking place in a context of multiple, interdependent “relationships.” Relational leadership (Ospina and Sorenson, 2006; Ospina and Uhl-Bien, 2012) whereby leadership is defined as a process of social construction produced through relationships (Fairhurst, 2007; Hosking, 2011) is thus a lens through which empirical research on collaborative leadership may be explored.

First, in terms of understanding leadership, “constructionists privilege process and context over agency” (Ospina and Uhl-Bien, 2012, 18). Leaders and leadership as such are embodied in context and in relationships (Ospina and Hittleman, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006). There is thus an explicit emphasis on the importance of context and a recognition that actors are embedded in it (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012). While there are also important differences, including, for example, the notion of ‘relational’, the TCA and the CRL emphasize the importance of the context in which leadership takes place. Therefore, one area where further theoretical conceptualization may be fruitful relates to the context of collaboration and the inherent relationships in which leadership takes place.

Second, leadership in collaborative contexts relates to a “collective challenge” which also demands attention to elements of leadership beyond the exclusive focus on the leader (Heifetz, 1994; Ospina and Sorenson, 2006; Ospina and Hittleman, 2011). The TCA explicates the source of leadership as not exclusively the individual as a leader but also the structure and processes inherent in the collaboration (Huxham and Vangen, 2000a; Vangen and Huxham, 2003). This is consistent with the constructionist view that “the leader,” while relevant for action, represents a different phenomenon to that of “leadership” (Ospina and
Hence, a second area for conceptualization may usefully focus on leadership constructs that transcend individual leader qualities and traits.

Third, the TCA and the CRL emphasize actors as embedded in context and point to the danger of confusing leadership with an individual identified as the leader. The three leadership media in the TCA places the focus on an individual among structures, processes and participants. It thus effectively considers the relational processes that produce leadership in inter-organizational collaborative contexts (see Uhl-Bien and Ospins, 2012). Ospina and Foldy (2015, 495) summarises that “Collective leadership turns upside down the basic assumptions about the source, object, and end result of leadership. The source of leadership is not exclusively the leader; it may also be the groups of the structures and processes devised to advance the shared goal. The object of leadership is not the follower or the groups but the work to create an environment that is full of leadership (an environment where everyone can contribute in an ongoing community with capacity to collaborate on and jointly produce collective achievements. Collective leadership thus offer an excellent lens to understand and practice leadership in today’s shifting government arrangements.” Ospina and Foldy provide a further useful comparison of traditional and collective views on leadership as reproduces in Table 1 below. Clearly leadership from the perspective of the TCA is more consistent with the collective views of leadership as in right column of Table 1.
Table 1: Traditional versus collective views on leadership (from Ospina and Foldy, 2015)

All of the conceptualizations of leadership summarized here – from the theory of collaborative advantage, constructionist relational leadership and collective leadership – emphasise the importance of a broader lens of leadership. Yet they also emphasise within this broader lens the importance of the work of individual leaders and their leadership conduct. To that end, the next section provides an overview of relevant findings from a current empirical research project into collaborative leadership.

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

We include here a brief overview of findings from a preliminary research project into collaborative leadership spanning public and non-profit sectors in the UK. The broad aim of
the project, conducted in July and August 2016, was to gain an up-to-date insight into how experienced individuals perceive of their collaborative leadership practice. It was undertaken in the context of a UK public sector children’s services; a context characterized by turbulence, austerity and now Brexit. In this context, the requirement to “do more with less” challenges individuals and their organizations to tackle cross-cutting societal challenges in increasingly efficient ways (Diamond and Vangen, 2017).

While we are taking a fresh look at collaborative leadership in a societal context, we are not assuming that the leadership conceptualizations developed from research on collaboration some 15 years ago have not stood the test of time. However, in terms of advancing knowledge on collaborative leadership, several factors are important.

First, collaboration is far more prominent than it was some 15 years ago. As such, many individual collaborative leaders are more versed in their practice than they were 15 years ago. In terms of developing the TCA, and with particular emphasis on developing theory that is useful to practice, getting a fresh overview of individuals’ perceptions of their practice seems essential. For theory to be relevant to practice, it needs to connect with individuals at the back of their practice (Vangen and Huxham, 1997).

Second, the context is important, as pointed to above. Beyond collaboration being a more common modus operandi, there are a number of ways whereby the contexts within which collaborative leaders operate have changed. For example, public sector collaborations are increasingly inherently culturally diverse in terms of the changing demographics of both the workforce and service users, and owing to the sphere of activity increasingly spanning national as well as organizational boundaries (Foldy, 2004; Oberfield, 2015). It is possible that, in the UK public policy context, collaborative leadership feels less fraught because it is
more common. On the other hand, it may be more fraught owing to recession, austerity, turbulence and the impact of Brexit in the UK and beyond.

Third, the leadership conceptualizations inherent in the theory of collaborative advantage were developed from a perspective of collaboration rather than the perspective of leadership. Recent interest in, and research about, collective and relational dimensions of leadership offer a different lens through which to focus on collaborative leadership.

Research approach

The study comprised of semi-structured interviews with ten individuals who all have extensive and long-lasting experience into ‘collaborative leadership’.

Participants: The interviewees held a wide range of management positions within different public sector organizations over significant time periods, usually with direct individual experience of collaborative leadership in more than one sector. A brief overview of individuals’ experiences can be found in appendix 1. Their various roles included leadership in local government, non-profit sector providers and commissioners, health services, schools, housing associations and further education/learning and skills. Their experience also reflected working within different parts of local government (social work, early years, children’s centres, early help, commissioning, youth services, senior management, education, housing).

Their collaboration partners included the youth offending service, community safety, the police, the National Lottery and other funding bodies, community health services such as health, nutrition, midwifery, occupational therapy, CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services), GPs, and health commissioners such as CCGs and Public Health. They also worked with employment organizations, benefits agencies, adult mental health services,
a range of national and local non-profit and community sector organizations, the courts, architects and surveyors, national government including DfE (the Department for Education), DWP (the Department of Work and Pensions), DCLG (the Department for Communities and Local Government) and the Cabinet Office, local councillors and, of course, the children, young people and families themselves.

The interviewees described their work as taking place through a range of collaborative structures from high level partnership groups such as the Children’s Trust board, the Children’s Safeguarding board, the Community Safety Partnership, the Youth Offending Partnership board to more operational meetings such as multi-agency commissioning and planning meetings, multi-agency steering groups and collaborative project boards.

Individuals also described working through collaborative processes such as CAF (common assessment framework), MASH (multi-agency support safeguarding hub), cross sector improvement networks, cross borough collaborative programmes and more informal community orientated development meetings.

**Interviews:** The interviews were semi-semi structured and aiming to allow individuals to both reflect on their experiences of collaborative leadership and talk about their practises in the current context. The interviews were all recorded and transcribed. During the interviews, prompts were developed from the content of the conversation as well as the following questions:

- In what contexts do they practice collaborative leadership?
- How do these various contexts dictate the nature of this leadership?
- How do the individuals articulate the kind of leadership that they enact?
- What kinds of collaborative leadership agency appear to make a difference in the process and outcomes of collaboration?
- What steps do they take to address these?
- What leadership challenges do they experience?
**Data and analysis:** Perhaps owing to the interviewees’ very extensive leadership experience, the data gathered were richer and far more extensive that we had anticipated. At the time of writing, the analysis is not yet fully completed. However, we analysed the data for recurring themes and issues across the ten interviews. This analysis suggests that there are four main topics of data capturing interviewees’:

1. Perceptions of the impact of context on their collaborative leadership
2. Descriptions of their own collaborative leadership practice
3. Perceptions of collaborative leadership challenges
4. Views on what seems to make a difference in terms of structures, systems and people

A table of sub category labels is included in appendix 2. Importantly, the thematic analysis of the data, which was done by the second author, was not influenced by a theoretical perspective of relational dimensions of collaborative leadership. However, a careful reading of a 9500 words long document providing a detail description of data items (the first two topics listed in appendix 2), alerted the first author to data which appeared relevant to relational dimensions of leadership for collaborative advantage. This is perhaps unsurprisingly in light of the theories summarized above. While it was not an explicit framework used for data analysis purposes, it became the lens through which we narrowed the analysis and focused the conceptualizations in the next section of this paper. Specifically, the first author scanned the document for data which provided insight about ‘relational aspects of the context in which the interviewees enact leadership’ and ‘experiences of collaborative leadership addressing relational challenges and issues’. The process led to the
identification of what we have termed relational leadership dimensions. An overview of four initial dimensions are provided in the next section.

Leadership for collaborative advantage: Relational leadership dimensions

The study found a number of dimensions of relational leadership that arises in the context of UK public sector children’s services. In what follows, we report on four dimensions that, this preliminary study suggests, arise in the interface between 1. Sectoral contexts; 2. Partner organizations and the collaboration; 3. The collaboration and service users, and 4. The individual leader and the collaboration.

Sectoral context

One of the ways in which the need for relational leadership is manifest in cross-sector, inter-organizational collaboration is through the different ways in which individuals can ‘make things happen’ in the different contexts that are relevant to a collaboration. In the current case study, this is evident through individual’s experiences of working in different sectors. Typically they compare working in the non-profit sector to a local authority or the health service. They convey how belonging to a particular sector influence their ability to lead or be effective in collaborative working.

Individuals who had worked in both non-profit and statutory public sector organizations such as local government, health services or further education made unprompted comparisons characterizing the non-profit sector as more flexible and open. Flexibility was explained as “you’ve got more autonomy … policies and procedures are … less restrictive in the charitable sector” allowing managers to “think outside of the box”
(Patricia). It was further described as “a softness to the space where you can step in and collaborate” (Katrine). This flexibility is seen as having practical uses that can be harnessed for the benefit of the collaboration. For example, “it’s easier sometimes for us to process invoices. We often do this for the local authority, where they want something through quickly” (Alison).

In contrast, when providing unprompted descriptions of the impact of working in larger and more formal public sector management structures on collaborative leadership, interviewees said that the impact of the organizations meant “more processes and red tape to get through” (Suzanne) and “sticking to policies and procedures, … even where things don’t necessarily make sense” (Patricia). In addition to more rigid process issues, complexity and hierarchy such as the democratic nature of the local authority structure itself added difficulty for participants. For example, “local councillors start to get irate and it gets fed back to you anyway as if it was your issue” (Ruth). For those outside, the local authority, the complexity is even greater – “we interact with two separate parts of the local authority, which are poles apart…. you might as well be talking to two different countries, frankly” (Katherine).

These examples suggest that it may be easier to “make things happen” in the non-profit sector and that this may be an incentive for individuals in public organizations to work collaboratively with individuals in non-profit ones. However, interviewees also reflected on aspects of the size and complexity of local authorities that support their collaborative practice. These included access to experts in different areas, experience and also resources – “there’s a lot more support …. more departments that you can go to for assistance … A lot more people that you can talk to” (Patricia). Others found the more hierarchical structure useful to impose some order on the complexity of collaborative working – “You understand the politics. You understand the structure. You understand the model that they're trying to
deliver. You might not agree with it, but you've got a sense, so that you understand it” (Betty).

In terms of relational leadership for collaborative advantage, the current study shows that different contexts dictate how leadership may be enacted. It thus highlights the need to understand the different contexts that are relevant to a collaboration, how those contexts interact and overlap, and how to make things happen within those various overlapping context.

**Partner organizations versus the collaboration**

A second relational leadership dimension reflects the situation that organizations typically participate in many collaborations. Only a portion of an organization’s remit tends to be associated with any one collaboration. Most individual leaders participate in the activities of a collaboration while continuing to do most of their work for a specific organization. This then gives raise to relational leadership that sits across the boundaries of organizations’ remits with that of the collaboration. The current study highlighted a number of relational leadership aspects including identifying collaborative opportunities for organizations, persuading individual organizational managers and helping individual participants share frustrations within the collaborative structure.

In terms of identifying collaborative opportunities for organizations, interviewees talked about their roles as persuading, influencing and sometimes prodding relationships across sectors to develop new or revised joint practices. For example, one non-profit sector senior manager reflected that “the leadership is … being able to persuade and identify the opportunities for those organizations and your own to work together to achieve those
outcomes or achieve those changes that you need to make…. It’s about … helping them to identify different ways of doing things” (Suzanne). The responsibility for a collaborative leader may be about being proactive in thinking about potential opportunities to work together for change - “not just waiting for things to happen … thinking, are there partners out there or potential organizations that I don’t know or that don’t know me? And making those relationships … to see if there is anything we can do” (Alison).

A related process of achieving developmental collaborative change was also described by interviewees. The approach was sometimes described as a relentless drive for partnership, utilising the skills of partners to add value as well as better bidding capacity to a new development: “we… always think collaborative work. We always think partnership…. We feel that a partnership bid brings a better mix of services to a project. So there’s always that kind of awareness of potential partnerships and potential collaborative working” (Alison). More sustainable development was described as building local community involvement into a collaborative development in order to gain sustainability or package the project in a different way to attract additional funding: “what you need is then how do you work with other people who are in that community as well to make it happen or make it work? And then you might be able to get some funding to help sustain that in a different way” (Ruth).

This current study highlighted that a significant part making collaboration a reality is about ensuring that time and resources are available to carry out collaborative activities. Individuals spoke about how, particularly in large public sector organizations, this often meant representing collaborative working in a way that met the demands of more single agency or target based managerial demands. Interviewees reflected on their roles in relation to their relationships with their home organization and its hierarchy, specifically their direct managers, or, where they were in a commissioned service, their experiences in dealing with their contractual requirements and the impact on collaborative working. Many of the issues
described are about trying to make rigid or poorly focused contractual obligations work in a fluid and turbulent changing practice environment or to flex partnership issues in a direction that an uninterested manager will find relevant to single agency concerns.

Managing the manager is thus seen a necessary relational leadership activity. This may involve the collaborative leader in presenting issues in a way that makes them appear more relevant to a more senior manager engaged in single agency management: “you do have to manage your manager sometimes. Does that sound horrible? … I would never … be dishonest … But if I felt that it was going to influence the way we worked then I would try and phrase it or tip it in a way that I know she will be open to” (Patricia). Collaborative leaders see this as “managing up as well as down…. That’s where I can make a difference” (Rachel), ensuring that collaboration is given more opportunity to work because of their constant attention to massaging managerial relationships. There is a sense of negotiating where battles need to be fought and where to limit engagement because of an inability to control the context: “it’s about choosing your battles … that’s what I have to do because some things aren’t going to be taken forward because that’s not where the focus is and that’s not what my manager’s interested in” (Patricia).

Individuals involved in collaborative activities, in the context of this current study, clearly experience a great deal of frustration owing to the uncertain and complex environment within which they work. Individual leaders reflect on the importance of representing and clarifying the collaboration process as ongoing and dynamic. The leadership role in this respect may be to “just try to lay some foundations properly … You’re not going to be able to deal with everything… there’s always going to be unexpected things, or things that kind of happen that are kind of outside of your control… But then that comes down to kind of making sure that people are aware of that” (Ruth). The leadership role ensured that the focus remained on the job in hand – “It’s … about establishing what we all think we’re all there to
do…. I think sometimes that gets lost” (Betty). In addition, interviewees were aware of the struggle to keep the collaboration clear in the face of everyday demands – “it’s about how you actually work more collaboratively together…you have to keep revisiting that because… everyone gets bogged down with their day job” (Ruth).

A tactic used by some of the leaders in this current study is deliberately use the collaborative process to share frustrations with partners. One manager noted that “partnerships can be a good forum and a good way to share those frustrations because my colleagues in other organizations are in the same position” (Patricia). In these instances, participants were able to use the collaboration itself to overcome frustrations and constraints from home organizations and identify with either trusted partners or with the collaboration forum itself.

Another important way of using collaborative frustrations was for the collaborative leader to allow these to become articulated within the collaborative forum. This enabled partners to air difficult issues which drew either support from other partners or clearer understandings of intractable or unspoken problems: “sometimes … I think you just need to let things be said and aired… it’s useful for that person to have the opportunity… It’s not always negative is it? …you have to just weigh it up” (Ruth). This flexible approach underlines the pragmatic and dual nature of partnership management, enabling frustration to drive an agenda where necessary.

The above examples then seem to highlight a relational leadership dimension pertaining to the boundary between the individual organizations and the collaboration. Relational leadership in this sense, is about understanding and addressing the kinds of challenges that arise at the level of the organization, the organizational manager and the
individual who represent an organization in the collaboration and how issues at these various levels interact.

The collaboration and service users

A third relational leadership dimension arises through the need for a firm focus on the relationship between the collaboration and the end service users. The current study highlights leadership pertaining to: leveraging a practical ‘moral purpose’; having an open attitude to collaboration and mirroring relationships and structures.

The current study highlighted a firm focus by the individual leaders on the core outcomes of the services they were providing over and above professional or organizational concerns. For example, this often manifested itself in individuals picking up on the differences collaborative working made to individual families “you can support a family, and you can actually see the movement of that family…. That's the impact that you make” (Betty). Making a difference through collaborative leadership is seen as a way of preserving the positive aspects of collaborative work in a difficult environment: “It’s really hard work but it’s really, really satisfying… when you can see the difference it’s making for some families… where we’ve made a huge, huge difference” (Rachel). Some practitioners held onto this success with individual cases or small pieces of successful collaborative work as the only bit of sanity in a confusing and turbulent environment: “you’ve got to feel there’s some light, something you can do…. You can’t just keep coming to work every day just thinking oh god I can’t do anything. It becomes hopeless” (Ruth).

This focus on successes with individual cases and limited but positive outcomes is seen as a way of motivating staff across agencies to work together on common ground. This approach, it was noted, effectively merges a nurturing trust building role with more
manipulative and opportunistic leadership with the aim to ensure effective cross-sector working - “you don’t have some of the formal levers … then some of the moral purpose becomes more important” and again “they want to focus on the outcomes they’re trying to achieve for children …. that is one of the things that makes them unique and motivates them and you’re … kind of missing a trick if you don’t channel what people turn up for” (Ben). What these examples seem to suggest is that the use of a practical ‘moral purpose’ which works across organizations to motivate practitioners within collaborations is a necessary relational leadership activity. Notably it is both supportive and manipulative at the same time.

Another way that the interviewees described their leadership roles was to have what many of them called an ‘open’ approach to working collaboratively. One participant, working in a local authority youth service, said “it’s hard to pin it down … but it is very much about … going into it in that open way of wanting to do it, or thinking about how beneficial it can be as well as recognising that it can be really frustrating, and also challenging” (Ruth). A school-based children’s centre manager said “it’s just trying to be transparent and open about what you are there to achieve but actually highlighting the benefits of working together to do that” (Suzanne). This attribute of openness was explained as “to be open… to say the things that are difficult for us” (Patricia) – ensuring that partners understand the problems involved. This translates for another participant as “having outwardly focused vision … around working together” (Fiona), seeing the attitude of a collaborative leader as a key element of how a partnership might work effectively. The open attitude as a trust building exercise was seen to work when other managers also developed similar attitudes, enabling a smooth path for collaboration: “if those managers were open and I developed quite a good relationship with them, it was quite easy, you know, and things worked well” (Patricia).
The impact of austerity remained a key feature of sharing ideas to trial new practices. One participant succinctly described the process of having to find new approaches because of austerity and doing it through shared ideas and practices: “you’ve got to do things differently, and you’ve got to do it in a way that is… as cheap as possible. So, if you know someone who’s done it elsewhere and you can get them to work with you… you can share their ideas” (Julia). Effectively, collaborative leaders retain their faith in partnership working despite the challenges of austerity, seeing their role as joining up services for better outcomes: “it’s about how you join things up better so that it feels more synchronous, even though it probably can be a bit clunky … It’s about making the best use of limited resources” (Ruth). One participant summarises the description of a collaborative leader’s role in development as “the best way of ultimately achieving … public sector outcomes is through partnerships and you’ll never get that unless you do it, but … it’s one of the hardest parts of the job” (Ben).

The idea of mirroring relationships and structures also relates to the importance of building trust through focusing on core outcomes for families for a children’s sector workforce. Interviewees described the modelling of the kinds of relationships needed for effective practice with those needed for good collaborative leadership. This reflection of positive collaborative practice in leadership style was described as “there’s a kind of mirror over it, the …way you want the relationship between the children in families in your work… one based on respect and trust and seeing the strengths in families …you also want a leadership style which mirrors that” (Ben). The same participant sees the same mirroring process in the structures of national partnership working in a less positive way – “you see those problems (of partnership working) played out at a national level… so … that … gets reflected back a bit at local levels” (Ben). In this case, the modelling process provides a poor example of structures and relationships that do not work effectively.
In terms of relational leadership for collaborative advantage, the study appears to highlight aspects of leadership that arises from a firm focus on the relationship between the activities of the collaboration and positive outcomes for end users. It begins to describe elements of leadership that have worked in practice without suggesting that there is an exact science to it. It suggests that successful leaders take an open approach, which may include legitimizing manipulative leadership behaviour and mirroring successful approaches.

The individual leader and the collaboration

The current study also identified a relational leadership dimension stemming from the interface between the collaboration and the individual collaborative leader. It seeks to convey the personal resilience and sheer energy that is required of an individual as they engage in relational leadership for collaborative advantage. It appears to convey something about the individual leader's relationship with “self”.

The data suggests that being a collaborative leader involves juggling a set of complex relationships. Importantly, this entails facilitative and nurturing aspects such as setting expectations, clarifying roles and building trust. Yet, it also involves, as reported on here, more directive aspects of individual leadership including tenacity, confrontation, manipulation, isolation, dismissal, and work-around.

One of the challenges inherent in the enactment of relational leadership, the study suggests, is the need to actively manage partners. An understanding of how and where to challenge partners was articulated as part of the skills base required for the role. For example, one of the interviewees reflected on confronting a commissioning partner: “taking the decision that … as a leader, you need to challenge … even though you’re conscious that
you’re commissioned by these people to provide services. So you have to be a little wary of that, and not alienate too much” (Alison).

Individual leaders also highlighted the importance of ensuring that partners within the collaboration have the authority to make the decisions expected of their organizations in order to progress agreed outcomes. This was also seen as a leadership activity that often required confrontation and manipulation - “it’s making sure that people do have some sort of authority…. To actually make a change” (Alison). Where it is clear that the partner either has the ability to decide or the facility to take the required decision back to their organizational management structure, the approach can be direct: “positive challenge…why are you holding it up?” (Suzanne) or “challenging partners and saying… this isn’t good enough” (Ben).

Interviewees described routing around problematic partners or organizations in measured and collegiate ways necessary in order to make collaboration work – “like-minded people developing pathways of communication…even though that might be taking a circuitous route around” (Julia). Such an approach may include being both evasive and persistent, taking a longer view and using multiple ways of tackling issues – “if it’s not going to happen, just move on to where it might… keep battling away at it” (Alison). Such a mild and positive approach, it was noted, can also morph into a more insistent way of finding a route around the blockages: “it’s about getting to know … what might be the barriers … and then trying to work out how you can get round those” (Suzanne) or a more manipulative and blaming response to difficulties: “‘you have to strip down all of the things that they’re going to put in your way” (Julia).

Collaborative leadership may also involve managing un-cooperative partners in more manipulative ways, for example, in situations where individuals continue to represent a real block to progression. Individuals talked about isolating individuals within the collaboration
or dismissing them completely. Leaders were unambiguous in their descriptions of the process: “I may be the only one in the room who takes that view initially but over a period of 18 months I’ve persuaded ten other people to come on board” (Julia). “It’s about getting everyone else on board sometimes to make them sort of outnumbered” (Suzanne). “It can be a little bit unpleasant where …. you feel you’re alienating that person when … you’re trying to do the total opposite and get them to be part of the group” (Suzanne).

Dismissing partners may similarly be justified as a necessary means to ensuring the collaboration continues. One participant explained this as – “if you want to make a difference you need to have the right people in that forum… Maybe they need to be in a forum doing something else … They may just not need to be there” (Ruth). Interviewees explained that to getting to a point of being able to ‘make a difference’ may involve collaborative leaders in manipulation and decisive action to get rid of individuals. The aim of the manoeuvring is to ensure progress for the collaboration, reaching a position where, in order to move forward effectively: “we’ve been left with a hard core... of … the people who have got a real commitment to it” (Alison).

As a final example, a further aspect of manoeuvring partners in collaborations was described by a participant as being “tenacious” (Suzanne), working at raising important issues consistently and repeatedly, finding ways to discuss key points with a particular emphasis at significant meetings and in informal conversations, pushing a viewpoint that the participant feels is vital for the partnership to agree until partners feel they are unable to resist any more: “finding the right time to raise those again, and being quite tenacious about it as well. To the fact that they’re thinking, oh let’s just have this discussion because she’s not going to give up until we do” (Suzanne). Some of this approach is in order to get partners to consider new issues or ways of working together and to “help them outside their comfort zone” (Julia), scaffolding the development with a mixture of nurture and directive push. The
final element of the ‘tenacious’ approach is to ensure that “once you’ve got someone on board it’s not letting them go” (Suzanne), hanging onto the newly converted partners grimly to see that they do not backtrack or go back to their old professional habits, stabilising the partnership and agreed collaborative outcomes by charm and support or by more forceful direction if necessary.

These examples, included in the “individual leader and collaboration” dimension highlight the personal aspect of collaborative leadership, emphasizing the sheer energy and personal cost that may be associated with it. Successful leaders, it would seem, may need to be prepared to actively manage relationships that hamper to progress of the collaboration, including engaging in confrontation, manipulation and isolating and disconnecting partners. These may not be the kind of leadership tactics that immediately spring to mind as “collaborative or relational leadership”. Indeed, as one of the interviewees reflected “I think the biggest thing is about building personal relationships with people” (Patricia) identifying a good personal rapport is a key element of nurturing partnership. Yet they seem to feature as part of a complex set of relationships that needs to be effectively managed if a collaboration is to yield advantage rather than inertia.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

The paper began by arguing that there is a need for more empirical research to inform both the theory and practice of leadership in collaborative contexts. Individuals increasingly work collaboratively across organizational, professional, sectoral and sometimes national boundaries to address major societal issues. Yet research focusing on specifically on leadership practice in these context is not plentiful.
The paper aims to make a contribution to practice oriented theory derived from empirical research situated in inter-organizational collaborative contexts where the aim is to achieve some form of Collaborative Advantage. It begins to make such a contribution through reviewing leadership conceptualizations inherent in the theory of collaborative advantage and more recent research on constructionist relational and collective leadership. The review of these extant conceptualizations highlights a number of factors that are pertinent to empirical research on leadership in collaborative contexts. We highlight three here.

First, it highlights the importance of context and how context dictates the nature of effective leadership. In the case study reported upon in this paper, context was addressed in terms of inter-organizational collaboration, UK public sector children’s services, and as a context characterised by turbulence and austerity. There are however, a number of other ways in which context may be understood. For example, the context of collaboration may be understood as “inherently paradoxical”, characterised by numerous governance, leadership and management tensions that arise because collaborative advantage is rooted in the integration of differences. Alternatively, the context may be understood as a collaborative entity (such as a partnership or a strategic alliance) or as a less defined ‘collaborative fabric’ in which collaborative work takes place. A number of other possibilities exist. The multiple ways in which the context may be understood pose a methodological challenge. It is certainly essential to how leadership may be understood and hence how it may be researched. Researchers need to provide definitional clarity on the context in which leadership takes place and build this into the research design.

A second point, closely related to the first, is the idea that research on leadership in collaborative context can be undertaken from different units of analysis including the
individuals, organizations, collaborations and sectors. As discussed earlier, there is a need to apply a broad leadership lens which for example, sees the enactment of leadership by individuals in the context of structures, processes, other participants and more. If the focus of the research is the “individual enacting leadership”, it is still necessary to clarify whether the individual is enacting leadership on behalf of an organization or a collaboration or something else. Clearly findings that relates to “manipulative behaviour” need to be understood with respect to the intended outcome of the leadership. What this begins to suggest is that research on leadership in collaborative context is highly complex, and pinning it down for the purpose of research and theory development needs to be done with care.

A third point relates to the conceptualization of research findings and the various ways in which that may be done to advance both theory and practice. Notwithstanding considerable complexity, the current paper sought to make a contribution through empirical research on collaborative leadership in the context of UK public sector children’s services. Focusing on the individual within a broader leadership lens, it begins to show that research aimed at capturing current practice provides insights that advances understanding of relational leadership in collaborative context. Preliminary data analysis suggests that there are a number of relational leadership dimensions that can convey practice oriented insight. The paper begins to develop four such dimensions that arise in the interface between sectoral contexts; partner organizations and the collaboration; the collaboration and service users, and the individual leader and the collaboration. Though not complete, the conceptualizations are emerging out of a thematic analysis grounded in the data filtered through the lens of relational leadership. While this may generate useful conceptualizations, there is nevertheless the sense that it simplifies what it ultimately a very complex topic.

Notwithstanding these methodological challenges, of which there are many more, the conceptual findings are certainly preliminary. Indeed the data implies further dimensions
pertaining for example to the different roles that individual leaders play. Also, while the data gathered from the interviews were richer and far more extensive than we had anticipated, the study is preliminary, aimed at paving the way for further empirical research.

The paper then is developmental in nature. More work is needed both in terms of analysing and conceptualising the data from the current study and in terms of conducting further research. Nevertheless, through the literature review and the findings from the empirical research, the paper makes a firm case for further research drawing on the theory of collaborative advantage and research on constructionist relational and collective leadership.

REFERENCES


### Appendix 1 – Participants’ descriptions of their experience in current and previous collaborative leadership roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individuals described themselves as:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Betty</strong> My working career has been for probably about 20 years in the <strong>voluntary sector</strong>. And largely <strong>local government</strong> from 2000 until 2012, and then I went back into the <strong>voluntary sector</strong>. And since then, I've done a mixture of voluntary sector and local authority work as a senior manager.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2. Julia</strong> Education and Social Work background and I have 30 years’ experience in <strong>local authority</strong>, in those departments.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>3. Patricia</strong> I started out training as a nurse, and did that, once I was qualified <strong>(health) and</strong> ... I worked for a housing association with the elderly <strong>(housing association - voluntary sector)</strong>, and then moved on to work in drugs and alcohol <strong>(voluntary sector)</strong> for quite a number of years. And <strong>(then)</strong> worked for the <strong>local authority</strong>...</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>4. Suzanne</strong> A commissioner in a <strong>local authority and</strong> ... currently working for the <strong>voluntary sector</strong>.</td>
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<td><strong>5. Alison</strong> In an organisation working in ... the voluntary sector ...<strong>and</strong> ... running a lottery-funded collaborative partnership project, which, we've been the lead agency for <strong>(voluntary sector provider and commissioner)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>6. Fiona</strong> I worked for a number of years within social services in a London borough <strong>local authority</strong>... I then moved into a ...... children’s <strong>(centre)</strong> local programme.... after ... that post I worked within the <strong>(children’s services)</strong> management team, and was working mainly on parenting and family support.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>7. Rachel</strong> My professional background is in social work .... then in the last over 20 years, I've been working in early help ... also was involved in the Children’s Centre phase 1... arm’s length overseeing these CAFs that are being led in the main by staff we don’t manage ourselves.</td>
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<td><strong>8. Ruth</strong> I’ve been doing work with young people for 20-odd years .... I think probably my first full time job ...... was in a <strong>voluntary sector</strong> <strong>(community youth organisation)</strong> and ...... work very closely with children’s social care, youth offending service, community safety, the police, health. Commissioning services, and the sort of more voluntary sector, and family services <strong>(local authority)</strong>.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>9. Katherine</strong> I worked for an education think-tank in London... when FE became learning and skills and included both colleges and work-place learning providers <strong>and</strong> ... I ran a network ...<strong>and</strong>... a work based skills training provider <strong>(voluntary sector provider and previously a commissioner)</strong>.</td>
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<td><strong>10. Ben</strong> Assistant director of children’s services <strong>(local authority)</strong>.</td>
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# Appendix 2: Thematic data analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Impact of context on collaborative leadership</th>
<th>2. Collaborative leadership practice</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1a Flexibility and openness</td>
<td>2a Clarify expectations</td>
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<tr>
<td>1b Impact of rigidity and hierarchy</td>
<td>- Clarify how to work together and on what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1c Impact of access to internal resources, experts</td>
<td>- Clarity of roles and how they fit with other roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1d Environment of uncertainty</td>
<td>2b Build trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1e Commissioner or provider?</td>
<td>- Focus on outcomes/service object</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Open attitude to collaboration</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Common ground</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Building trust</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2c Nurture/communicate</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Listening and nurturing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Use of formal and informal support</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2d Manoeuvre partners</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Preparation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Being ‘tenacious’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Challenge</td>
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<tr>
<td>3a austerity</td>
<td>2e Isolate/dismiss unhelpful partners</td>
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<tr>
<td>3a staffing changes/reductions; 3a as an excuse; 3a loss of funding; 3a lack of understanding</td>
<td>- Route around</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b Brexit</td>
<td>- Isolate and dismiss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b on EU funding; 3b on families;</td>
<td>2f Negotiate tensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3c innovation</td>
<td>- Lack of control/creative in support</td>
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<tr>
<td>3c risk because of austerity; 3c early resource intensive;</td>
<td>- Share/use frustrations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3d lack of accountability to partnership/lack of autonomy to act</td>
<td>2g Trial new practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3e single organisation or contract constraint/inflexible professional?</td>
<td>- Being proactive</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Sharing ideas</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Start small</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- ‘Right to risk’</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. What makes a difference – structures, systems, people</td>
<td>2h Model to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4a structures</td>
<td>- Modelling useful qualities</td>
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<tr>
<td>4b systems</td>
<td>- Mirroring relationships and structures</td>
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<tr>
<td>4c people</td>
<td>- Being visible</td>
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<tr>
<td>4d joint training/development?</td>
<td>2i ‘Being brave’</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2j Managing your manager or managing your contract</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Making managerial relationships work</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Making contracts work</td>
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<td>2k Influence change, development or innovation across partners</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Influence change</td>
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<td>- Developments across sectors</td>
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3a austerity  
3a staffing changes/reductions; 3a as an excuse; 3a loss of funding; 3a lack of understanding  
3b Brexit  
3b on EU funding; 3b on families;  
3c innovation  
3c risk because of austerity; 3c early resource intensive;  
3d lack of accountability to partnership/lack of autonomy to act  
3e single organisation or contract constraint/inflexible professional?  
4a structures  
4b systems  
4c people  
4d joint training/development?  
(Steps to address challenges)