



DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP: THE VALUE OF PURPOSEFUL LEADERSHIP EDUCATION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT SECTOR



CONTENTS

Executive summary	3
Leadership in practice	4
What is the capability deficit in development leadership?	5
The impact of more effective leadership	7
The role of targeted, purposeful leadership education	8
Acting on the opportunity	9
Our industry experts	10
References	11



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In a period of increasing complexity and challenge for international development, leadership is required at all levels of professional practice to navigate practical and ethical issues and influence organisational decision-making. However, organisations and employers in the sector report that the competencies underpinning leadership behaviour are hard to find.

This deficit of leadership capabilities is not only a risk for the operations of individual organisations. It is vital to demonstrate that effective leadership and collaboration are taking place across the sector in order to successfully maintain the credibility of development programs as valuable and efficient channels for supporting vulnerable communities.

The repertoire of competencies required for leadership in the development sector includes mental frameworks that enable strategies like critical thinking, problem-solving and project management. Importantly, it also includes behaviours like a focus on collaborative decision-making – an attitude which is essential in responding to the complex problems that development projects aim to address.

Experiential learning is prevalent as a form of professional development for both existing and future leaders in the sector, and short courses can provide targeted solutions to specific skill gaps for individual practitioners. However, research among those working in development shows there is an expressed need for purposeful, long-form education to successfully ingrain the shifts in behaviours and philosophies required for effective leadership.

Development professionals looking to act as leaders in their organisations and in the development community will therefore benefit from education that combines:

- Building the capability for critical thinking grounded in knowledge and research about the sector's unique needs
- A focus on sustainable, long-term development and retention of the strategic thinking and behaviours that enable effective leadership in the sector
- Opportunities for practical use of competencies in simulated scenarios relevant to their professional experience
- The use of digital tools, platforms and networking practices that reflect current and future behaviour in the sector.

By completing this education in the form of a specialised graduate degree in an academic setting, those working in public, private and non-governmental organisations can prepare to fill an identified gap in the development sector.



LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICE

As we consider the need for leadership in development, we must first address the modern philosophy of what leadership means in development practice.

As stated by Hudson and McLoughlin (2019, p. 6), leadership “cannot pursue real change without influencing people, or persuading them to change their ideas or behaviours”.

The word ‘leadership’ carries implications or connotations which are counterproductive in a field in which collaboration is essential. Leading roles are still required in many decision-making structures, including in development, but leadership cannot be considered solely as the imposition of direction by a dominant organisation or individual.

A fundamental rethink is needed about where decision-making power needs to reside in order to achieve the changes to which development agencies aspire (Honig & Gulrajani 2018).

It is useful to refer here to the conceptualisation by Leslie and Canwell (2010), wherein leadership is tied to successful delivery of results and requires multiple actors across an organisation or system. Leadership is not about an individual in a senior role – it is about many people across an organisation involved in leadership activities for which core capabilities are required.

While leadership can be part of a specific role a development professional takes on within an organisation, they can therefore also practice leadership at any point in their career where they hold influence in a relationship – such as when guiding decision-making, motivating colleagues or working collaboratively.

In this sense, leadership skills are valuable for any development professional, and in some contexts – such as project management and delivery – become essential to achieve the best outcomes.

For any given project, external stakeholders or collaborators can include government (or governments), the private sector, non-governmental organisations, and local communities. Negotiating these stakeholders’ needs, priorities and dependencies cannot be achieved through unilaterally directing decisions.

Indeed, the fact that development so often seeks to address ‘wicked problems’ – which, by definition, are essentially unique with no single solution – means that a collaborative approach can often be the only feasible way of assessing and developing a response.

In the same way that modern development brings together disparate skillsets and resources to deliver what communities need, from healthcare to education to technology, contemporary leadership for development must include bringing together a diverse range of perspectives and knowledges for truly collaborative decision-making.

Leadership therefore also requires practitioners who are committed to the (at times uncomfortable) process of awareness and self-reflection required to successfully implement a development philosophy of guidance rather than control and co-design rather than imposition.

We cannot keep thinking about development as a one-size-fits-all strategy. One of the most important things we want to challenge is this idea of imposition – powerful organisations or individuals defining what development should look like. Development is not about what an agency thinks is the best way of improving wellbeing. It is about what people believe they need, and how to invest funds in strengthening what is already there.

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WHAT IS THE CAPABILITY DEFICIT IN DEVELOPMENT LEADERSHIP?

In the field of international development, much of the focus is on beneficiaries, donors and practitioners as development experts. However, less attention has been given to the need for leadership that can support processes of transformative change, and for professionals to build the competencies they need to enhance the performance and success of their operations.

At a time when leadership is critical, the development sector is reporting a gap in talent with the capabilities needed to take on these roles effectively. ‘Lack of leadership’ has long been seen as a constraint in the sector (Green 2009) and one that continues to trouble the field today (Devex 2020). The first imperative for the sector is therefore to acknowledge and understand the enormity of the challenge (Hodges & Howieson 2017).

To define leadership competencies and capabilities as they are relevant to the development sector, we must necessarily include management techniques – such as planning, strategising, coaching and mentorship.

However, the various challenges and issues shaping the sector require a suite of complementary abilities.

The importance of empowerment as a development tool, and the need for philosophies of localisation and decolonialisation to successfully develop aid programs that reflect the diverse needs and circumstances across the Global South, leads to the necessity of collaborative leadership – the ability to gather and listen to diverse perspectives to create effective change.

The political complexities of foreign aid – from financial considerations like government budgets to the political use of aid in jostling between rival powers – require the ability to navigate these complexities while maintaining the openness and transparency that underpin the sector’s credibility.

The increasing range of ‘billionaire giving’, the growing influence of the private sector and the impact of South-South cooperation require leadership which has the flexibility and adaptability to negotiate how these dynamics continue to reshape the sector – and which can balance the importance of successfully sourcing funds with a focus on the communities where aid is needed.

Meanwhile, the impact of these and other factors on the development sector plays out against the backdrop of a broader crisis of trust in institutions and leadership.

Ongoing exposures of systemic abuse of power by people in positions of influence, including high-profile incidents within the development sector, reinforce the need for ethical leadership. More broadly, they also highlight the need for all practitioners in the development sector to undertake, as a matter of course, meaningful and evident self-reflection and acknowledgment of their impact and role in a complex space.

Meanwhile, the *Devex Talent Outlook 2020* survey reports (p. 11) that when asked to identify the hardest-to-find soft skills, 58 per cent of employer respondents nominated leadership, planning, strategy and coaching.

Other skills identified by respondents as hard to find included empathy and cross-cultural sensitivity, problem-solving, flexibility, adaptability and conflict resolution – all of which are, as discussed, linked to the broader strategic competencies crucial for leadership in a modern development organisation.

The sector needs to ask difficult questions. That is: who do we have as leaders? What do they need to do as leaders? Are they equipped to do what they’re supposed to do? These questions expose complexities, vulnerabilities and even inadequacies, and sometimes can be challenging – but we need to confront them.

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THE IMPACT OF MORE EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Effective leadership has more wide-ranging impacts than simply the success of a single aid organisation in achieving specific project goals, or even its broader development objectives. The development sector rises and falls on its reputation.

In a funding landscape where aid is subject to government budgets and external funding sources, development organisations need to display efficiency as well as effectiveness in their outcomes. There has been a marked intensification in pressure both to perform and to demonstrate that performance (Salamon 2010).

As we face this emphasis on healthy and strong organisations delivering outcomes throughout the development sector, we also face the knowledge that leadership capabilities across an organisation are as crucial to its success as the effectiveness of specific individual leadership roles.

Even acknowledging the perceived gap in leadership competencies, development organisations are well-known for their effectiveness in getting to the root of problems and implementing approaches that make a meaningful impact.

Programmes which are seen as inefficient or wasteful risk the damage of funding impacts, which are ultimately suffered by the communities they aim to serve.

Likewise, ineffective or unworthy leadership that affects the credibility of an organisation – or the sector – also risks ultimately damaging the wellbeing of vulnerable communities.

The development sector is one where passion often drives the workforce – from bringing in new talent to supporting the motivation and resilience necessary to achieve sustained results in a challenging environment. It is therefore vital to ensure that passion is complemented by leadership that can best harness it to produce effective aid outcomes.

We know leadership is important. This knowledge manifests itself in research where we look at why so many development projects or initiatives do not result in developmental impact or the desired outcome – in other words, project failure. Time after time, in these kind of studies we see leadership featuring as a critical success or fail factor.

Dr Jaco Renken

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THE ROLE OF TARGETED, PURPOSEFUL LEADERSHIP EDUCATION

To help professionals fill the leadership gap identified by development employers, and help the sector benefit from more reflective and effective leadership, there is a demonstrable need for targeted, purposeful leadership education.

However, leadership theories and frameworks cannot be imported from other sectors, such as the corporate world – critical adjustments must be made to ensure these tools reflect the unique needs and culture of the development sector (Hodges & Howieson 2017). Successful leadership in the sector needs distinct skills and behaviours as a result of the sector's multiple stakeholder relationships and general complexity, which makes it qualitatively different from the public and private sectors (Hopkins 2010, 26).

When collaboration is crucial to individuals, organisations and the sector accomplishing their goals, successful leadership education includes building an understanding not just of others' perspectives, but of the impact of one's own attitudes and behaviour.

Suitable education in leadership for the development sector is therefore not just education in a theoretical framework that enables critical thinking, adaptability, problem-solving and sound project management – but also education in establishing the skills and behaviours needed for successful collaboration.

However, the development sector can often be an environment in which self-guided experiential learning and post-implementation project evaluation represent the main opportunities for professional development, rather than devoting dedicated time to studying the competencies and knowledge that contribute to effective leadership.

While short courses and targeted training can help to address these areas, there is a marked need for dedicated, longer-form education formats which offer the opportunity to practice and ingrain contemporary leadership competencies.

Of these competencies, one of the most vital is reflexive thinking – building understanding of one's own beliefs and practices and their effect on your behaviour. An extended period of study that incorporates reflexivity as a philosophy ensures that students not only appreciate and acknowledge the necessity of this mindset, but also build experience of routinely incorporating it into their work.

There are also further benefits to extended study of leadership in a traditional educational setting – and in particular, the specialisation offered by study at the masters level.

The social shifts seen in response to COVID-19 have meant that online delivery of degrees is becoming more relevant through providing students with practical experience in the tools re-shaping professional interactions in the modern era.

In particular, the use of online platforms to build networks and communities between students living across the world reflects the current practices in international collaboration within the development sector, where participants come together to co-create learning spaces and work cooperatively on joint goals.

These periods of extended collaboration with a study group also provide the opportunity to build and strengthen networks with professional peers – encouraging knowledge-sharing and fostering innovation in best practice for the sector.

A number of courses will focus on the skills component: how do you listen? How do you handle conflict? How do you communicate more effectively? That's important, but if it's not grounded in a very strong evidence base of what things work and the reasons behind this, they could be short-term quick fixes which don't develop the applied thinking skills that have a longer retention period.

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ACTING ON THE OPPORTUNITY

There is significant career opportunity for development professionals who are able to draw not just on their own experience but also on frameworks of strategic thinking and decision-making.

Completing a masters degree in leadership for development that answers the particular demands unique to this sector will mean those working in different public, private and non-governmental organisations can, as contemporary leaders, fill an identified gap in the development sector.

In turn, this leadership development will deliver valuable and lasting outcomes for actors at all levels of the sector: for individuals, it will enable career progression and more effective development practice; for organisations, it will support the accomplishment of their strategic goals and development objectives; for the sector itself, it will encourage its health and efficacy into the future.

THE MASTER OF LEADERSHIP FOR DEVELOPMENT

Co-developed by the University of Melbourne and The University of Manchester, the Master of Leadership for Development is a fully online program that focuses on developing the practical capabilities, global connections and collaborative outlook needed to fill the leadership gap in the development sector.

Graduate with confidence, networks and translatable competencies that support your leadership path in the sector and help you make effective change through your work.

[Read more about the Master of Leadership for Development.](#)



OUR INDUSTRY EXPERTS

Meet some of the team from the University of Melbourne and The University of Manchester supporting leadership development in the development sector through collaborative teaching and research:



DR DENISSE RODRÍGUEZ
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Denisse is a lecturer in Development Studies and holds a PhD in geography and Master of Environment from the University of Melbourne, Australia, as well as a Master in International Relations from the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, Ecuador. Her areas of expertise include alternative development trajectories, environmental governance, socio-ecological conflicts and extractivism, and decolonial approaches to knowledge production.



DR JACO RENKEN
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Jaco is co-director of the Master of Leadership for Development and holds a PhD in information and communications technology for development from the University of Manchester, England. His areas of expertise include international development, leaders and their role in socio-economic development, and the implications of data and data analytics for the development sector.



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Matthew is a lecturer in Development Studies and holds a PhD in anthropology and development studies from the University of Melbourne, as well as a Master of Philosophy from the University of Ghana. His areas of expertise include the politics of international development, inequality, and religion and neoliberalism. His research examines mainstream development models and their applicability in developing contexts, including some of the emerging tensions.



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Natalie is co-director of the Master of Leadership for Development and holds a PhD in executive coaching and Master of Business Administration from the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa. Her areas of expertise include leadership development, organisational culture and talent management, and she is currently leading a study looking at lifelong learning and the educational needs of the development sector.

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