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Public Service Leaders as 'Change Agents' - for Whom?

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Abstract

This article examines how far senior staff in English educational and health service organizations view themselves as leaders who are 'change agents' for government-driven reform and independent change agendas. The contribution of external leadership development provision to shaping these self-perceptions is explored. Special attention is paid to national leadership development bodies with different degrees of formal association with government. Whatever this relationship, such provision and other development support apparently reinforced a strong sense of personal agency (choice of action) associated with being a leader, empowering senior staff to adopt a modestly mediatory stance towards both reform and leadership development provision.

Key words

Acculturation strategy, change agent, change mediation, leadership development, public service leader

PUBLIC SERVICE LEADERS AS 'CHANGE AGENTS' – FOR WHOM?

Responses to leadership development provision in England

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DEVELOPING LEADERS AS REFORMERS OR INDEPENDENT AGENTS OF CHANGE?

The purpose of this article is to examine the contribution of external leadership development provision to fostering a self-perception among senior staff in English public service organizations that they are leaders whose role integrally entails acting as ‘change agents’: whether proactively working to ‘make things happen’ as conduits for the implementation of government-driven reform, or more autonomously seeking to set the direction for service improvement and responding to independent change agendas.

External leadership development implies a planned sequence of activities designed to support learning, offered by specialist providers that are not part of target recipients’ organizations. We are especially interested in the provision sought and experienced by senior staff from service sector-specific national leadership development bodies (NLDBs). They are now a major source of external leadership development provision for almost all service sectors in England. New or re-configured NLDBs have proliferated in recent years from diverse origins, with the result that they have different degrees of formal association with government. Those for fully public funded services, including the National College for School Leadership (NCSL – renamed, since the period of our study, the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services) and the National Health Service Institute for Innovation and Improvement (NHSII), have a closer formal relationship with government than the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE). This sector is only part-public funded, and its status as a public service (rather than a private enterprise) is increasingly contestable (Deem *et al.* 2007). It is possible that the close or distanced nature of this relationship could be reflected in the relative balance of focus in different NLDB provision between promoting leaders’ change agency for reform or for independent agendas. If so, we might expect senior staff from different services who have experienced this provision to perceive their change agency in correspondingly different ways.

To explore the contribution of external leadership development to senior staff views of themselves as leaders and change agents, we undertook a perception study covering secondary education, healthcare and higher education (HE). In this article we will show how senior staff across these fully and part-public funded services largely share a view of themselves as leaders. They intrinsically associate being a leader with change agency, adopting a proactive role in the instigation and implementation of change in their service organizations. Yet on whose behalf – government, other stakeholders or themselves – they see themselves operating as agents of change is more problematic, as is the contribution of external leadership development provision to such perceptions.

These issues are examined and empirically grounded in the remaining sections of the article. First, we briefly review literature on the emergence of leadership in public service discourse, the promotion of leadership development, notions of agency in

general and change agency in particular, and the role of acculturation and mediation in change, especially that spanning administrative levels of public service systems. Second, we introduce the conceptual framework guiding relevant aspects of our research and outline our methods of data collection and analysis. Third, we summarize our documentary findings and report in detail the self-perceptions of senior staff in public service organizations as leaders and change agents, and the salience, experiences and reported impacts of external leadership development. Finally, we draw tentative conclusions about the mobilizing and mediating role played by NLDBs and, more significantly, by visionary leaders as change agents in promoting the implementation of public service reform alongside local improvement agendas.

LEADING QUESTIONS

What does it mean to be a leader?

'Leadership' is a metaphor (Hoyle and Wallace 2007), a device for understanding complex experience through simpler ideas that draw attention to some aspects of social phenomena while inevitably downplaying others. Metaphors are embedded in discourse, capable of subliminally framing the perceptions underlying actions: 'Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 3). The pervasiveness of leadership metaphors in discourse on direction-setting and co-ordinating work in public service organizations is remarkably recent (Hoyle and Wallace 2005). Much longer-established have been metaphors of management. Spurred by political concerns from the late 1960s over public service quality and burgeoning expenditure (Foster and Plowden 1996), management metaphors were translated from their origins in the private sector (Grey 1999) into the public services (e.g. Osborne and Gaebler 1992). These metaphors framed prescriptions for improving public service practice, based on the assumption that 'business knows best'. They were soon reflected in academic labels encapsulating the assumptive shift underpinning government discourse – the new 'managerialism' (Clarke and Newman 1997; Exworthy and Halford 1999), and policy – New Public Management (Hood 1991; Ferlie *et al.* 2003). They were also soon reflected in the self-perceptions of senior staff in public service organizations, framing their practice as direction-setters and co-ordinators. Indicatively, UK educational research showed how the perception of being a manager was intrinsic to the practice of the senior management teams that had emerged as a new form of co-ordination structure in schools (Wallace and Hall 1994; Wallace and Huckman 1999).

However, from the mid-1980s, the harsh 'top-down control' resonance of management metaphors linked with NPM-imposed marketization and accountability practices has arguably been 'gentled' (Hoyle and Wallace 2007) by the adoption of more invitational metaphors of leadership. This shift in discourse in part reflects the

emergence of visionary leadership theory and the ‘cultural turn’ in management theory. Contingency theories had long dominated the study of leadership, focusing on varied characteristics of leaders, followers and the situation (e.g. Fiedler 1967; Hersey and Blanchard 1969). As questions began to be raised over the relationship between managing and leading (Zaleznik 1977), Burns (1978) articulated his seminal notion of ‘transformative’ leadership in political life – heralding a revolution in thinking, policy and practice. He advocated that leaders should encourage those they led to transcend their immediate self-interests through developing a *shared* vision for radical improvement, and then foster synergistic endeavours to achieve it driven by a collective moral purpose. Translated as ‘transformational’ leadership (Bass 1985), this normative conception has gained purchase in public services research (Leithwood *et al.* 1999; Goodwin 2006), policy (OPSR 2002; Newman 2005) and service organizations, as we shall see.

The critical attribution of elitist (Bass and Avolio 1993) and heroic (Yukl 1999) connotations to transformational leadership due to its focus on ‘top’ formal leaders has been tempered through the broadly compatible notion of ‘distributed’ leadership (Gibb 1969; Gronn 2000). Leading activity is viewed as collective: influencing others across organizations is variably dispersed and reciprocal, as research in higher education (Bolden *et al.* 2008) and schools (Leithwood *et al.* 2008) attests. However, the idea that leadership is distributed tends to under-acknowledge structural inequalities of power, span of responsibility, and accountability (Hoyle and Wallace 2005). Evidence suggests that in hierarchically ordered organizational collectivities, leadership is inevitably *hierarchically* distributed (e.g. Wallace and Hall 1994; Wallace and Huckman 1999; Collinson and Collinson 2006; Bolden *et al.* 2008). While influencing others may be in part reciprocal, those in the ‘highest’ formal positions have greater authority that legitimates their influencing activity, together with greater accountability for others’ work. It is also noteworthy that metaphors of leadership have overlaid, but not replaced, metaphors of management in public service discourse (O’Reilly and Reed 2010). Leading connotes change (Kotter 1990), as we will discuss. Managing tends now to be relegated to maintenance activity, consistent with the distinction articulated by Louis and Miles (1990: 19): ‘Leaders set the course for the organization; managers make sure the course is followed.’

How is the idea of being a leader promoted?

The emphasis of these leadership metaphors on generating unified support for a collective improvement effort was consistent with the ‘cultural turn’ of the early 1980s in management theory (Schein 1985), which possibly assisted their spread. Peters and Waterman (1982) conceived US private sector managers’ task in terms of developing a sustainable shared – or ‘strong’ – organizational culture, captured by Deal and Kennedy (1982: 19) in the aphorism ‘a new law of business life: In Culture

there is Strength'. The novel focus on what has been termed 'culture management' (Wallace and Pocklington 2002) was overtly instrumental: manipulating organizational culture to secure organization members' enhanced commitment towards achieving official goals. Culture management is also, like transformational leadership, inherently dynamic. The aim is 'to win the "hearts and minds" of employees: to define their purposes by managing what they think and feel, and not just how they behave' (Willmott 1993: 516). Thus culture management implies planned, one-way cultural *change* incorporating all organizational members as they come collectively to embrace the desired beliefs, norms, values and codes of behaviour of the (unchanging) managerial culture.

This assumptive change process may be construed as one form of *acculturation*, a concept long employed in studying the process and outcomes of interaction between different cultures (for a review see Rudmin 2003). An early definition covers 'those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups' (Redfield *et al.* 1936: 149). Possible outcomes include the *assimilation* (Berry 1997) by one group of the culture of another, modifying the group's existing culture and so altering its group identity. Culture management seeks to acculturate a target group by deliberately fostering the assimilation by its members of managers' culture. Transformational and (hierarchically) distributed leadership metaphors have many parallels. They similarly promote leaders engaging in instrumental influencing behaviour that encourages those they lead to subscribe to a shared vision, motivating them intrinsically, in turn, to achieve collective 'performance beyond expectations' (Bass 1985).

It seems scarcely surprising that government policy-makers have been attracted by the potential of culture management promoting transformational and hierarchically distributed leadership metaphors for the assimilation of senior staff (and also 'middle managers') in public service organizations. The shift towards leadership metaphors was soon reflected in England by diverse government department initiatives to develop public service leadership, emphasizing the development of senior staff as key leaders. The accession of the New Labour government in 1997 witnessed the onset of heavy investment in *leadership development*, centrally planned interventions to build leadership capacity. (Leadership development interventions thus contrast with the informal and often incidental learning process through which people in leadership positions develop their capability.) Some interventions overlaid and even ignored previous initiatives to develop management capacity (Bolam 2004). Others were newly established. Gradually, the Government's Cabinet Office (PIU 2001) paid more strategic attention to leadership development across the public services. But the only central cross-service leadership development policy that emerged was very modest: a voluntary forum for regular exchange between NLDBs formed in 2005 (the Public Services Leadership Consortium, later Alliance). What did transpire was a separate NLDB for each major English public service sector (Table 1).

Table 1: The proliferation of NLDBs for English public services between 1997 and 2008

<i>National leadership development body</i>	<i>Public service sector</i>	<i>Formal relationship with central government</i>	<i>Year of inception or reconfiguration</i>
Academy for Executive Leadership within the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA)	local government	<i>distanced</i> – formed as part of IDeA, owned by local authorities	1999 (IDeA)
National College for School Leadership	state school education	<i>close</i> – set-up and funded by central government's education department, receives an annual remit letter. Non-departmental public body	2000
Social Care Institute for Excellence	social services	<i>moderately close</i> – set up as a result of departmental reform of social care. Now an independent charity but funded by department	2001
Defence Leadership Centre within the Defence Academy	defence	<i>close</i> – Defence Academy set up as a result of the 2001 Defence Training Review, remit letter from Ministry of Defence. Executive Agency	2002
Leadership Foundation for Higher Education		<i>distanced</i> – set up by bodies representing higher education, receives financial support from UK funding councils via the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Company and charity	2004
National School of Government	civil service	<i>close</i> – National School of Government is a non-ministerial department	2005
Leadership Centre for Local Government	local government	<i>distanced</i> – impetus came from Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE); but supported and part-funded via central government. Charity	2005
NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement (superseding NHS Leadership Centre, part of NHS Modernization Agency, 2001–5)	health	<i>close</i> – predecessor reconfigured and funded by central government department after a central government 'arm's length bodies' review. Special Health Authority (arm's length)	2005

(continued)

Table 1: (Continued)

<i>National leadership development body</i>	<i>Public service sector</i>	<i>Formal relationship with central government</i>	<i>Year of inception or reconfiguration</i>
Centre for Leadership (previously Fire Service College Leadership Centre) within the Fire and Rescue College	emergency fire service	<i>close</i> – set up as a result of strategy by central government; funded by department. Executive agency and trading fund	2006
National Policing Improvement Agency (superseding Policing Leadership Academy within Centrex, 2002–7)	police	<i>close</i> – reconfigured as part of National Policing Plan. Remit letter, funded by department. Non-departmental public body	2007
Learning and Skills Improvement Service (superseding Centre for Excellence in Leadership 2003–8)	further education	<i>moderately close</i> – although new body is formally a company and charity, reconfiguration impetus and funding from department	2008

Most NLDBs were set up by government departments responsible for a particular sector. Only two were established independently, including the LFHE already mentioned (though even this NLDB is partially reliant on government agency funding). NLDBs are variously involved in the formulation, commissioning, provision and accreditation of external leadership training and complementary support activities to meet assumed or identified leadership development needs. Their publicly available documentation implies that they operate largely through *acculturation processes*, activities promoting normative leadership metaphors which inform deliberations about their applicability to implementing reforms and pursuing independent change agendas. A few (notably the NCSL, as this national body was known at the time of our research) also operate through a measure of compulsion: here provision includes training for statutory accreditation required for appointment to formal leadership positions. The external provision of NLDBs coexists with an array of other external and internal support, external providers ranging from charitable foundations, through private training and consultancy companies, to university centres.

How are leadership and change connected?

Proactive engagement with change is intrinsic to the dominant leadership metaphors applied to the public services. In the words of Bolman and Deal (1991: 408), ‘leaders make things happen’. Transformational leaders nurture and support major change for radical improvement. Insofar as leadership is hierarchically distributed, all who contribute to it – formally or informally – promote change for the better, according to their beliefs and values. These metaphors are highly voluntaristic, reflecting the implicit assumption that leaders possess sufficient personal *agency*, defined as choice among courses of action (Giddens 1979, 1984), to give them scope for alternative interpretations and practices. Especially so in the case of transformational leadership, since it is associated with freedom to choose the content of a vision around which collective commitment to radical improvement is built. Yet leaders’ personal agency is inevitably delimited by that of others (Wallace and Tomlinson 2010). ‘Things make leaders happen’ (Bolman and Deal 1991: 408): in the public services, senior staff are embedded as ‘piggies-in-the-middle’ of a multi-organizational administrative system (Wallace 2003). Ministerial ‘top-down’ engagement in reform has narrowed the parameters for leaders’ choice of action, channelling their agency in the direction set by government (e.g. Blackler 2006; Currie and Lockett 2007).

Metaphors of transformational and distributed leadership have become associated with the related metaphor of *change agency*, where personal agency over choice of action is directly tied with proactive engagement in bringing about change. *Change agents* are ‘the individuals or teams that are going to initiate, lead, direct or take responsibility for making change happen’ (Caldwell 2003: 140). But agents for whom? Change agency also embodies the idea of an ‘agent’: someone authorized or expected to act

instrumentally, on others' behalf. The term has its origins in the external or internal change consultant role envisaged by Lewin (1947) and elaborated by advocates of organization development (e.g. Schein 1988). Here change agents were process facilitators: agents of their employers or clients (typically managers), assisting them to bring about the change they desired. Subsequently change agency has become associated with leadership (see Caldwell 2003), with transformational leaders acting as change 'champions' (Ulrich 1997). They thus act implicitly as agents of change on their own behalf, since being a leader is intrinsically linked with making change happen: 'Leadership produces change. That is its primary function' (Kotter 1990: 26). Leaders also act as change agents working on behalf of other stakeholders to whom they are accountable, as where public service governance arrangements impinge on the work of senior staff (Newman 2001). Where leadership is distributed, whether within a 'leadership constellation' (Denis *et al.* 2001) or more widely, change agency is seen to be collective (Buchanan *et al.* 2007), with leaders implicitly acting on behalf of each other to achieve shared or compatible goals.

The degree of personal agency that leaders possess gives them some scope as change agents to determine their balance of allegiance: to themselves as leaders, and to other stakeholders including government. Such a balance of allegiance is culturally rooted. For senior staff in public service organizations, the beliefs and values (Schein 1985) and more subliminal codes of behaviour (Firestone and Louis 1999) constituting their culture will reflect their experiences of professional and organizational socialization (Merton 1963; Hart 1993) and perhaps formal development as service providers, professionals, managers and leaders. Cultural allegiances inform, but do not wholly determine, actions – as with 'resigned compliance' (Farrell and Morris 2004). Here behaviour is expressed, without believing in it, to comply with those perceived to be more powerful (Ashworth *et al.* 2009). Hence culture management, discussed earlier, arguably carries inherent limitations as a strategy for securing one-way cultural assimilation. Cultural beliefs, values and codes cannot be directly and swiftly changed in the way that observable behaviour can be – at least while those involved are under scrutiny (see Case *et al.* 2000).

How may the externally provided development of leaders as change agents be mediated?

The possibility that culture management has limited potency suggests that the role of NLDBs and other providers of external leadership development may not be straightforward in acculturating senior public service organization staff as change agents. Achieving their cultural assimilation as leaders who act as change agents (on behalf of government, other stakeholders or themselves) implies overlaying the beliefs, values and codes of their existing culture. Where the advocated and existing cultures are incompatible, acculturation processes cannot directly make cultural change happen.

It is possible that leaders may retain sufficient personal agency covertly to resist acculturation, even if expressing behaviour consistent with assimilation of the fostered culture. Certainly, indirect evidence from studies of cultures in public service organizations suggests that they are deeply embedded and often change-resistant. They may even legitimate sidestepping or modifying external change imperatives (e.g. Strathern 2000; Weick and Sutcliffe 2003; Hoyle and Wallace 2005).

There is also ample evidence that the personal agency of public service professionals brings with it some *power to mediate* (e.g. Brunetto 2001; Ferlie *et al.* 2005) or adapt others' attempts to change one's practice and beliefs, according to one's extant cultural allegiances. The notion of mediatory power employs the term 'mediation' in the sociological sense: the ability provided by a degree of personal agency to modify, extrapolate, downplay, work around or even avoid the changed practices and beliefs that individuals or groups are being invited, persuaded, mandated or coerced by others to adopt (Spours *et al.* 2007; Wallace and Hoyle 2007).

The power to mediate change initiated by others to a greater or lesser extent is unequally, though widely, distributed within and between organizations and across service systems. Each NLDB has been launched into the context of cultural allegiances among senior staff and others in the service organizations inside its jurisdiction, with their own sector-specific history. It is therefore conceivable that senior public organization staff may deploy some power to mediate their attempted acculturation as change agents through the activities of their sectoral NLDB and other providers of external leadership development. Further, the staff and trainers involved in these activities may equally deploy some power to mediate the shaping of their practice as acculturators of service organization leaders by the government ministers, officials or other stakeholders responsible for the creation and governance of any NLDB or other provider. In principle, the perceptions of service organization leaders as change agents could be affected by systemic mediation.

INVESTIGATING EXTERNAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN THE ENGLISH PUBLIC SERVICES

We have modelled in Figure 1 the process through which external leadership development may contribute to senior staff perceptions as leaders and change agents. The lefthand unshaded box represents key aspects of the service context in which senior staff operate. The shaded box next to it represents senior staff from three fully public funded sectors – secondary schools, plus Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) and hospitals within the National Health Service (NHS), and the part-public funded higher education sector. We are particularly interested in the cultural allegiances and self-perceptions of these staff as leaders and change agents, which stand to be shaped through external leadership development. The latter is represented by the righthand shaded box, which indicates that provision may be offered either by the appropriate NLDB for each sector

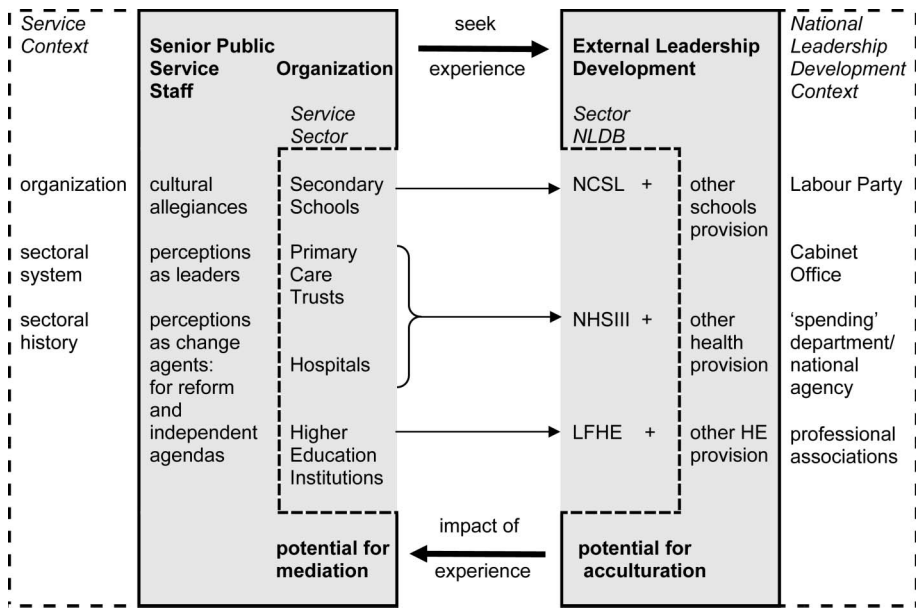


Figure 1: Contribution of external leadership development to leaders' perception as change agents

of concern to us or by other external providers. The righthand unshaded box next to it represents key aspects of the national context for leadership development, especially the relevant tiers of central government and its agencies, shaping the range and content of provision.

The dynamics of the external leadership development contribution to senior staff perceptions is depicted by the two heavy arrows at the top and bottom of the diagram. Senior staff may seek, and some may experience, external provision which carries the potential for acculturating them as leaders who perceive themselves as change agents for reform and independent agendas. The impact of this experience on their self-perceptions may be mediated through their exercise of personal agency where any attempted acculturation interacts with their existing cultural allegiances. The light arrows indicate how senior staff from particular sectors are served by a specified NLDB and other external providers.

Scope and methods of the research

The data to be presented were gathered as part of a qualitative enquiry into external leadership development in the public services, funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council and undertaken by a team from the Universities of Cardiff and Bristol. We focused on how senior staff in English education and health service

organizations seek and experience external opportunities to support their development as leaders in relation to change. Our investigation was confined to England so that we could be in a position to compare leadership development provision for different services. Devolution has led to different government-sponsored arrangements in the countries and principalities that constitute the UK. The establishment of NLDBs for different services has been most extensive in England. Special reference was made to the contribution of NLDBs to external leadership development provision in exploring how far senior staff perceived that they were being encouraged to – and actually did – perceive themselves as change agents for reform or independent agendas.

We selected four sectors for investigation (Figure 1) within education and health, the two largest and organizationally most complex English public services (Wallace *et al.* 2007). Accordingly, in the state school sector we confined our investigation to secondary schools (sectorally the largest and most complex organizations). Within health, Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) are novel organizations created in 2001 as part of government-driven reform with the function of co-ordinating and purchasing local healthcare services (Talbot-Smith and Pollock 2006). The NLDB serving secondary schools was the NCSL, and that for both healthcare sectors was the NHSIII. As Table 1 indicates, these NLDBs were established by central government and their provision was steered and monitored by the relevant government department. Our fourth sector, higher education, was selected for study as it is only part-public funded and the NLDB concerned originated from within the sector. A business case for the LFHE was constructed from research and steered by representatives of professional associations for vice chancellors and college principals. However, the formal independence of the LFHE from government was tempered, as we have noted, by its receipt of some financial support from government HE funding agencies. We selected these sectors to explore whether the proportion of public funding and strength of association between NLDB and government affected the self-perceptions of senior staff as change agents for reform or independent agendas.

Government-driven reform was conceived in terms of three components, co-existing in some tension (Reed 2002; Deem *et al.* 2007). First, as an evolutionary, loosely connected *political project* focused on restructuring to transform the organizational forms and mechanisms through which public services are managed and provided. Second, as an equally shifting *discursive strategy* to shape thinking about public services consistent with this political project. Third, as a loosely coupled configuration of *control technologies* – including NLDBs – to translate political aspiration and discursive intent into action across administrative levels, so changing the character and quality of service provision. This endeavour entails NLDBs articulating a discourse of service leadership conducive (or at least not inimical) to the Government's reform programme and independent initiatives that are compatible with it. NLDBs occupy a potentially mediating administrative position between central government and its relevant departments responsible for the particular public

service on the one hand, and service organization senior staff and their professional associations on the other. Other stakeholders, such as those involved in service organization governance, or independent trainers, may equally wish to acculturate change agents retaining some independence from government.

Two methods of data collection produced the findings discussed in this article. First, a longitudinal (1997–2008) and comparative discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003) of three Labour Party, fifty-two government, fourteen think-tank, fifty-eight NLDBs and seventeen professional association and stakeholder documents addressing public service leadership. Second, ninety-six confidential semi-structured interviews conducted with senior staff from an opportunity sample of five secondary schools, five PCTs, four hospitals and six HE institutions (three old and three new universities) during 2007 (Table 2). The formal leaders of organizations from each sector in three English regions were invited to participate, and to nominate up to four senior staff colleagues. Interviews covered informants' self-perceptions as leaders and change agents, experiences of external leadership development and its impact, and role in relation to government policy and independent change agendas.

Informants' responses were coded according to pre-specified and emergent categories (Glaser 2001). Their discourses were also analysed inductively and compared with the documentary analysis. Data reduction was achieved through extensive tabulation for economic display of patterns across the data (Huberman and Miles 2002). Since our interest lay in the span of experiences and perceptions among our informants rather than those of any individual, we constructed our analysis tables according to the number of informants mentioning a particular inductive category in their response. In some instances these heuristic categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and individual informants may have mentioned more than one category.

This investigation was designed as a comparative exploration of discourses and perceptions, rather than of practices. It enabled us to produce qualitatively rich analyses contrasting different sectors, and to link documentary and informant data. Thus one limitation was that informants' claims were not triangulated against their observed

Table 2: Profile of interviews with senior staff in service organizations

<i>No. interviews</i>	<i>English fully or part-public funded service sector</i>				<i>Total</i>
	<i>Secondary schools</i>	<i>Primary Care Trusts</i>	<i>Hospital Trusts</i>	<i>HE institutions</i>	
Formally designated leaders	5	4	4	6	19
Other senior staff	20	17	16	24	77
Total	25	21	20	30	96
No. service organizations	5	5	4	6	20

actions. We were aware that perception studies may elicit idealized self-representations from informants but, following Goffman (1969, 1986), accepted that this phenomenon is endemic to all social interaction. Our priority lay with the – possibly idealized – discourse of informants’ descriptions of themselves as leaders and change agents, while also probing informants’ accounts of their involvement in change by seeking examples that backed their claims. A second limitation was that we did not access the perceptions of less senior colleagues or other stakeholders. However, we focused exclusively on senior staff because they were most likely to have experienced external leadership development provision.

GOVERNMENT PROMOTION OF LEADERSHIP FOR REFORM AND THE ROLE OF NLDBS

Our documentary discourse analysis indicated that service organization leadership was firmly associated with the New Labour political project of public service reform across the national levels of government forming the context for leadership development (Figure 1). However the LFHE documentation underscored its formal independence from government. Leadership was one of the third commonest items in shorthand representations of reform within government documents (O’Reilly and Reed 2010). Such documents contained explicit statements that leaders and leadership were expected positively to affect the implementation of reforms, and that leadership development was to assist them in doing so. These statements reflect the strategic positioning of NLDBs to inform service organization leaders about the implications of reforms for their organizations and to assist them with developing their understanding and response. In contrast, leaders were only occasionally depicted explicitly as change agents for reform in NLDB documents. Yet this linkage was made through leaders’ common portrayal as promoters of broad ‘public goods’ – including high educational standards and a healthy population – to be achieved through government reform policy.

In this illustrative example of the Government’s discourse strategy, leadership and NCSL provision are articulated with the aims of government policies for schools:

In England, the government is sustaining its commitment to education as a means to securing prosperity and social well-being. The White Paper of September 2001 sets out a demanding agenda for schools, including:

- building on the literacy and numeracy gains at Key Stage 2
- raising standards at Key Stage 3
- a more diverse curriculum with more vocational routes for older secondary pupils
- more opportunities for specialist and faith schools
- more support for teachers
- more autonomy for successful schools

- more choice in the supply of services
- intervention to tackle failure

The College [NCSL] will help school leaders to find their way through this agenda. We believe that confident and empowered leaders will use it to create a unique educational vision for their school. The College will be a source of support, challenge and refreshment for leaders in their quest to renew and recreate their school.

(NCSL 2001)

'Confident and empowered' leaders are represented here as both proactively addressing government policy and expressing a degree of autonomy via their 'unique educational vision'. External leadership development provision, in turn, is represented as 'refreshing' leaders – in a manner analogous to how leaders are expected to 'renew' their schools.

Government discourse allowed for construals of service leaders as tailoring national imperatives to local circumstances, but not construals which ignored such mandates. The mediating position of the NLDBs, interposed between government and the senior staff they served, was reflected in their documentation. While following this line of local tailoring in respect of reforms, the NLDB documents articulated generic areas of leadership activity that allow for both policy-based and independent initiatives, as above. In another instance, the NHS Leadership Qualities Framework states, as one of its core leadership qualities: 'Leading change through people: focus on articulating the vision with compelling clarity. Keep up the focus on change by reiterating the modernization message and also through inspiring others to be positive in their support of service improvement' (NHSIII 2006: 11). While this example is ostensibly silent on the provenance of change, it represents change positively as 'modernization' and 'service improvement' – two key synonyms of the Government's policy agenda.

These documents represented service organization leaders as having relative autonomy, with neither the NLDB role nor that of leaders being depicted as solely for promoting government-driven reform. Rather, they stressed the achievement of improved 'public goods' through change initiatives and service improvement programmes. But the parameters of their potentially acculturating role remained implicit in what was not said – there was no promotion of resistance to reforms or of independent initiatives that ran counter to them.

PERCEPTIONS OF SENIOR STAFF IN PUBLIC SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

Findings for the following interview foci will be presented in turn:

1. approaches to leading change;
2. self-perception as change agents for government-driven reform and independent change;

3. experiences of external leadership development (if any) in the form of training and other support, and its role in developing informants as change agents;
4. perceptions of the impact of external leadership development on their change agency.

Are we all leaders now?

Almost without exception, the senior staff interviewed from all four sectors (whether the formally designated ‘top’ leader or colleagues occupying major management roles) confirmed their strong identification with being a leader in their organizations. Nearly two-thirds of informants expressed aspects of the discourse of transformational leadership, recounting beliefs in the importance of vision, direction-setting and motivation of colleagues. Just under half of informants reported more concrete forms of personal agency: the use of authority or formal powers and responsibilities of their position. Informants generally believed that being a leader was a core component of their role. A university dean of faculty listed responsibilities of this role as:

Leading the management team to deliver the objectives of the School, and the strategic plan of the School. It is leading the development of the strategic plan, and, yes, in fact leading each initiative, be it leading the marketing and recruitment of the School, leading the space reconsiderations of the School, leading the reconsideration of the course portfolio.

The discourse of almost a quarter of informants expressed aspects of distributed leadership, highlighting that they were not sole leaders in their settings. A hospital medical director drew attention to the hierarchical nature of this distribution: ‘leadership at the top is effectively a sum of the little leaderships that take place everywhere in the organization’. Just one informant, a hospital medical director, hinted at a more distanced approach towards being a leader:

Every month or two I go over to our education block and I give a lecture on leadership. But ... I don’t talk about leadership in the way a lot of people talk about leadership. I talk about how you set about making a hospital better.

Informants strongly affirmed how their leadership entailed change agency, as portrayed by the categorization of their leadership discourses in Table 3. Categories 1–4 either refer explicitly to the content (e.g. reforms) or process of change (e.g. setting direction), or imply that a desired change in others’ work is being promoted (e.g. inspiring). While categories 5–6 do not make this association, they conceptualize a framework of expectations for leading change if it were required, whether by the

Table 3: Perceived linkage of leadership with change

<i>Categories of leadership discourse</i>	<i>Primary</i>				<i>Total</i> <i>(96)</i>
	<i>Secondary</i> <i>schools</i> <i>(25)</i>	<i>Care</i> <i>Trusts</i> <i>(21)</i>	<i>Hospital</i> <i>Trusts</i> <i>(20)</i>	<i>HE</i> <i>institutions</i> <i>(30)</i>	
No. viewing leadership in terms of					
1. implementing government-driven reforms	–	6	–	–	6
2. strategy, giving clarity, setting direction or decision-making	12	6	17	8	43
3. involving others in change or developing them to take it on	16	6	8	8	38
4. inspiring and motivating others or providing a moral framework	4	5	8	7	24
5. responsibility for others' work (team, project, organization)	7	4	8	10	29
6. dissipated/distributed	9	3	–	6	18

Note: Individuals may have expressed more than one category of leadership discourse. Thus the views of particular informants may appear in two or more cells in the column for the sector concerned.

informant (e.g. as team leader) or by others (where distributed). Informants tended to describe their approach to leading change in fairly general terms. There were some contrasts between sectors in the balance between centrally directed and more dispersed perceptions about how change was led. Informants from hospitals saw this role most extensively in terms of direction-setting. Whereas there was stronger emphasis in HE institutions on more distributed responsibility for diverse organizational units and teams, perhaps reflecting the HE matrix structure of multiple specialisms and cross-cutting co-ordination committees.

But few informants – and these solely in PCTs – associated their approach explicitly with implementing government-driven reform. It did not appear to be at the front of most informants' minds. That around a third of PCT informants mentioned it may reflect the fact, as noted earlier, this sector constituted a recent reform (Pollitt 2007), and that as commissioning organizations they were given responsibility for implementing government policies in the health sector (e.g. DoH 2005).

Agents for whom?

Informants' degree of distancing from a primary leadership role solely as reformers was indicated in their self-perceptions as change agents, summarized in Table 4. Informants

Table 4: Perceived role as change agents

<i>Self-perceptions of change agent role</i>	<i>Secondary schools</i>	<i>Primary Care Trusts</i>	<i>Hospital Trusts</i>	<i>HE institutions</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>No. informants</i>	<i>(25)</i>	<i>(21)</i>	<i>(20)</i>	<i>(30)</i>	<i>(96)</i>
1. faithfully implementing government-driven reforms	8	13	11	13	45
2. adapting reforms to local circumstances	20	7	15	20	62
3. taking independent initiatives	18	14	12	21	65

Note: Individuals may have mentioned more than one change agent role category. Thus the views of particular informants may appear in two or more cells in the column for the sector concerned.

almost unanimously regarded themselves as agents of change. But although about half saw this role to include faithfully implementing reforms, two-thirds saw it to include adapting them, and two-thirds to include taking independent change initiatives. In the words of a hospital director of strategic development:

It's a pretty uninspiring vision to say, 'Our vision is we're going to implement government policy.' So if you're wanting people to go with you on the journey, then having a broader vision which makes sense locally and is articulated in a way which has meaning locally, is a much better way to make progress.

Most of these leaders were reportedly independent-minded enough to adapt at least some reforms to their local circumstances and to push their own change agendas unrelated to reforms.

Personal agency was clearly delimited: no informants implied that reforms could be avoided, though how faithfully or speedily they had to be implemented was reported to be variable. The relative emphasis on adapting reforms and taking independent initiatives was greatest in both education sectors. The scope for manoeuvre here may reflect the lower burden of compulsory and tightly framed reforms than in health. However, there was significant emphasis on adaptation and independent initiatives in these sectors too. The lower emphasis in PCTs on adapting reforms may reflect their status, mentioned earlier, both as a reform in themselves, and as a conduit for other reforms. Senior staff were responsible for implementing PCTs as a new form of organization and for co-ordinating local health economies in the manner outlined by government. But there was also scope for established PCTs to undertake local initiatives as part of their service function. Overall, most informants seemed to identify with being leaders, legitimating the deployment of their personal agency, as leaders, for mediating reforms to suit their circumstances and priorities, and also for promoting other change agendas.

External leadership development: A technology of control through acculturation?

Acculturation of informants appeared to have occurred: they had assimilated a near-universal perception of themselves as leaders with a role in promoting change. We noted earlier how the term 'leadership' was rarely used in the public services until recently. However, the sources of their acculturation may be diverse. One possible source – certainly in government eyes – could be the promotion of leadership through NLDBs (including school education and health). The documentary analysis implies that they represent an investment in a novel technology of control, in part to operationalize the government reform programme in different service sectors, on the grounds that it 'requires support for and development of excellent leaders capable of tackling poor management and inspiring ambitious performance' (OPSR 2002: 21). The NLDBs for the school education and the health sectors were part of this investment. While the LFHE had been independently proposed for higher education, it was in effect soon incorporated into the investment portfolio through the government agency element of its funding (noted earlier).

Table 5 summarizes the training that informants had experienced, and a few were currently seeking. The most extensive form of external leadership development was the traditional away-from-the-workplace course. (Note that some informants may have experienced training from both their NLDB and other providers but the table depicts only the range of experiences.) About half of our informants had experienced or were seeking substantial NLDB training courses, the form of NLDB provision with greatest potential for acculturation. Its reach was least extensive in the hospital sector, where there was a long history of established alternative providers and no requirement to access the sector's NLDB. It was most extensive in the secondary schools sector, reflecting the requirement since 2004 that all aspiring first-time headteachers must obtain the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) from the NCSL prior to appointment to a headship. (Roughly half of secondary school informants had completed this qualification.) However, substantial training courses offered by other external providers were almost as popular as NLDB training courses, suggesting that alternative sources of external leadership development provision may be equally influential.

The NLDB training provision in all four sectors was perceived by most informants to be relatively general in content, consistent with the NLDB documentation, and so not explicitly tied to reforms. Among informants who commented on the nature of NLDB training, the large majority perceived it as a general professional development opportunity – whether the NLDB had a close formal relationship with central government (NCSL and NHSIII) or not (LFHE). One university pro-vice chancellor noted that LFHE provision 'tends to be more sort of personal career based advice, rather than to do with specific problems or issues at the university'. (This focus could potentially inform individuals' approach to change agency through raising awareness of

Table 5: Training courses sought and experienced from NLDs and other providers

<i>Categories of training No. informants NLD for the sector or other training provider</i>	<i>Secondary schools (25)</i>		<i>Primary Care Trusts (21)</i>		<i>Hospital Trusts (20)</i>		<i>HE institutions (30)</i>		<i>Total (96)</i>	
	<i>NCSL</i>	<i>other</i>	<i>NHS/II</i>	<i>other</i>	<i>NHS/II</i>	<i>other</i>	<i>LFHE</i>	<i>other</i>		
<i>No. informants seeking or with experience of one or more training courses from NLDs (and other providers):</i>										
1. senior leadership training	16	(3)	6	(6)	3	(11)	14	(11)	39	(31)
2. specific provision (for specialist role, e.g. finance)	-	(-)	2	(3)	3	(3)	-	(-)	5	(6)
<i>No. informants seeking or with experience of one or more short courses from NLDs (and other providers):</i>										
	5	(7)	1	(5)	-	(4)	6	(13)	12	(29)
Total of informants seeking or experiencing courses from NLDs and other providers	20		17		15		26		78	

Note: Individuals may have mentioned more than one training category or type of provider. Thus the views of particular informants may appear in two or more cells in the column for the sector concerned.

their strengths and limitations as a leader.) While reforms were reportedly mentioned, their implementation was not a major focus. As one NCSL-trained deputy headteacher noted: 'Part of it is about keeping people updated on new ideas and new reforms that are coming through and . . . obviously if you're in education and you're in the leadership team you need to know about what's going on.'

A substantial minority of informants had experienced other forms of external leadership development support from NLDBs and other providers. They included short courses and activities also featuring in the more substantial training – action learning sets, coaching and mentoring, and 360 degree appraisal – alongside academic courses and job placements. One hospital chief operating officer mentioned a longer-term support relationship which had been maintained since changing health sectors:

I've had a . . . coach since I was appointed as a chief exec in a primary care trust in 2001. I will still use him periodically about once every six months, and he was recommended by the NHS Institute [NHSIII].

Very few informants saw NLDB provision as promoting the implementation of government-driven reforms. Even a PCT director who did so, also saw this provision as offering a professional and career development opportunity:

Yes of course it was, because that's what NHS chief execs are meant to do. NHS chief execs are accountable to the Secretary of State . . . but actually fundamentally what it was about was it was teaching you to be a – well, it was enabling you to find a place where you could be a confident, independently thinking and effective Chief Executive . . . It was also about helping me to build up further knowledge about myself, to help me move on in my career.

A school deputy headteacher pointed to the government concern with recruiting sufficient headteachers, rather than to the NCSL operating as a vehicle for specific reforms:

Fundamentally, it's a kind of very expensive response to the fact that people don't want to become headteachers in an education system where . . . [the role of] headteachers [has] become a thankless task . . . I perceive the National College for School Leadership as a kind of political response to the issues we have in education.

Thus the perception of those experiencing NLDB and other external leadership development provision was overwhelmingly one of the training and other support assisting their general learning. Insofar as the two government-established NLDBs (NCSL for schools and NHSIII for health) represent a technology of control, the perceptions of those with experience of their provision imply that these NLDBs are themselves somewhat mediatory. As indicated above, the provision received was reported to be generic, and only obliquely related to reforms where participants happen

to be tackling them at the time. Speculatively, it is also possible that recipients' power to mediate may have empowered them to internalize only the messages they wished to hear.

Impact of external leadership development: Acculturation or cultural reinforcement?

Those informants who had experienced external leadership development provision generally attested to its practical value. Yet their accounts of its impact ranged from the impressionistic to the specific. Table 6 depicts the range of reported impacts among all forms of external leadership development on recipients' self-perception as a change agent.

Significant impact on particular aspects of informants' practice as a change agent was reported by a substantial minority across all four sectors. A hospital medical director had engineered a direct relationship with a key stakeholder group:

It has changed my approach. I suppose I'm much more aware of public health issues, and I'm much more prepared to go to the city council now. Whereas before I would have gone to the PCT, because I wouldn't have been able to get to the city council, now I know I've got a route to the city council, where actually public health issues are probably dealt with in lots of ways, better ways. They're talking about housing, sanitation, all the issues that actually cause people far more problems than whether or not they're being vaccinated.

In a university, the director of personnel and staff development had increased data usage to support negotiation with senior academic staff:

We've become a very data driven organization ... it's much more powerful for me to be able to go out and say, 'Actually, based on the opinion survey that we did, 80 per cent of staff say they're not familiar with the university's goals and objectives ... can you talk about why that might be?'

But slightly more commonly reported was a more diffuse impact: to have influenced informants' practice as change agents through informing their thinking – summed up by one school deputy headteacher as 'making informed decisions rather than gut reaction decisions'. Another deputy headteacher who had experienced NCSL training noted how it more generally stimulated the process of practical reflection as a precursor for action:

Obviously it gives you the expertise, but also the capacity to reflect, and I think that's probably one of the strengths of the leadership courses I've been on ... it's not totally the input from whoever's leading the course as the chance to actually think through ideas and come to your own conclusions on them, and having the space to do that is very important.

Table 6: Perceived impact of external leadership development experienced

<i>No. informants</i>	<i>Secondary schools</i> (25)		<i>Primary Care Trusts</i> (21)		<i>Hospital Trusts</i> (20)		<i>HE institutions</i> (30)		<i>Total</i> (96)
	<i>NCSL and other</i>	<i>NHS/11 and other</i>	<i>NHS/11 and other</i>	<i>NHS/11 and other</i>	<i>NHS/11 and other</i>	<i>LFHE and other</i>	<i>NLDBs and other</i>		
<i>No. informants perceiving the impact of external leadership development in terms of:</i>									
1. practice as a change agent	7		7		5		14		33
2. informing thinking about practice	14		8		10		9		41
3. other (e.g. informing preparation for inspection)	4		4		3		5		16
<i>Total informants perceiving one or more impact from provision of NLDBs and other providers</i>	15		12		13		21		61

Note: Individuals may have mentioned more than one impact category. Thus the views of particular informants may appear in two or more cells in the column for the sector concerned.

Whereas a director of primary care in a PCT pointed to learning more about the endemic structural problems in the sector, which could inform adaptive change strategies:

Sometimes a programme ... can actually leave you ... with a higher degree of cynicism, because when you get more exposure to a system you realize ... that there isn't an answer; there isn't someone that's doing brilliantly and you can say, I want to be like them and then it will be all right ... Probably the thing I would take from [the programme] would be greater confidence in questioning because of the recognition that the system is very much faulted, and that's enabling in a lot of ways.

Finally, a few informants referred to diffuse impacts, such as extending their networks, and specific practical impacts, as where a school deputy headteacher learned from an NCSL training programme how to create an account of practice in terms that would meet inspectors' expectations at a forthcoming school inspection.

Overall, these findings suggest that the cultural impact of external leadership development may have been primarily to reinforce recipients' existing culture, although augmenting it through raising their awareness. No informants claimed to have had an NLDB-stimulated 'Damascus Road' transformational experience of acculturation towards regarding themselves as conduits for central government reforms. The impact of both NLDB and other external provision seems perceived among recipients in all four sectors who had experienced it as mostly quite diffuse, and perhaps culturally superficial.

CONCLUSION: PUBLIC SERVICE LEADERS AS CHANGE AGENTS – FOR THEMSELVES?

The model outlined in Figure 1 focused the generation of findings which offer a tantalizing glimpse of the complex interplay between attempted acculturation on the one hand, and its moderate mediation across service system levels on the other. These findings offer support for the theorization of public policy implementation as a contingently ambiguous and even ironic (Jessop 1998; Hoyle and Wallace 2008) process of intrinsically mediated mobilization. Ironic in that the mobilization effort, here deploying persuasive discourse to win the hearts and minds of implementers, variably generates the unintended consequence of its own serial mediation by implementers based at each administrative level along the policy-into-practice chain. Their mediatory response is informed by their extant service cultures.

Our documentary sources confirm that mediation was not the sole preserve of senior staff in public service organizations. External leadership development – at least that provided by those NLDBs closely associated with government departments – was viewed within government in terms of mobilization through culture management: promoting leadership that would facilitate the implementation of its reforms.

Yet documentation from these NLDBs suggested a moderate degree of mediation since their provision, like that of the formally more autonomous LFHE, was only loosely related to reforms and also addressed independent change. So however close or distanced the formal relationship between each NLDB and government, all three acted as mediators of reform interests and promoters of independent agendas.

Responses from informants who had experienced NLDB provision were consistent with this finding, though their responses may also reflect their personal power to mediate through paying selective attention. The messages they received appeared largely in line with their existing culture. Future research capable of reaching beyond perceptions to observed practice, ideally across multiple system levels and within service organizations, could further unpack the nature of this acculturation–mediation interplay.

But acculturation was as much part of the story as mediation. Given how recently discourses of leadership have emerged in the public services, it was striking how universally informants had assimilated into their culture explicit beliefs and values about being transformational leaders or contributors to hierarchically distributed leadership and, more implicitly, change agents. Yet those who had experienced NLDB provision – whatever the degree of formal association between the NLDB and government – and that of other providers implied that it was relatively independent of government interests. Its impact was reportedly diffuse, informing practical reflection more than guiding action. Tellingly, those who had *not* experienced this provision similarly perceived themselves as leaders of change. Thus the provision of NLDBs and others did not seem to be the most significant source of this remarkable acculturation, though it undoubtedly played a reinforcing role.

The prevalence of leadership terminology in government documents could offer a clue, in that its discourse strategy of promoting leadership discourse might conjecturally have had a greater acculturating impact. But the mass media and other sources of ideas could also have impacted. Either way, external leadership development for the schools and health sectors appears to constitute a readily mediated technology of control for the political project of reform, though it was congruent with and so probably supportive of the broader discourse strategy. Future research, here into the socialization of senior public service staff as leaders, perhaps with a retrospective element to capture the emergence of leadership discourse, could unpack the key influencing factors at work.

Also striking was the way such provision appeared to reinforce recipients' sense that as leaders they are agents of change on their own behalf, as service professionals. They felt empowered to adopt a relatively distanced stance towards reform and the content of leadership development provision, harnessing both towards the pursuit of their own enduring organizational vision, underpinned by their equally enduring cultural values. Speculatively, the promotion of a visionary form of leadership (in significant part through NLDBs, however close or distanced their formal relationship to government spending departments) may turn out to work towards the achievement of government objectives. The capacity of senior staff to interpose themselves between

government and their organization may assist them with productively adapting reform to their contingent local circumstances, while also pursuing independent agendas within the bounds of acceptability to government – as enforced by its accountability mechanisms.

Such adaptive capacity is consistent with current government devolutionary reforms, promoting collaborative networks for multiple service provision (Newman 2005; Newman and Clarke 2009) within the ‘new public governance’ (Osborne 2006), to encourage the pursuit of independent community-based agendas. Thus it may be in the interests of government policy to promote more effective practice by according service organization leaders sufficient personal agency to be their own change agents.

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