

Developing strong and diverse political leaders

Jo Silvester and Madeleine Wyatt look at the issue of training for politicians, and its relationship with work psychology

In 1882 Robert Louis Stevenson commented that 'Politics is perhaps the only profession for which no preparation is deemed necessary', and today it seems that his comments still hold. Despite a wealth of understanding in work psychology about how to train and support people in work roles, very few efforts have been made to apply this knowledge to political work.

Can we explain this lack of support and development for new and existing politicians? And could such provision be potentially problematic precisely because it challenges many of our taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of work and learning?

Strong and fair leadership is vital in a democracy. Psychologists know a considerable amount about developing people in their jobs in order to give the best chance of this (cf. Aguinas & Kraiger, 2009), yet we have had remarkably little to say about some of the most important questions relating to democratic leadership. What do we mean by good political performance? How can we support and encourage aspiring politicians? How can we develop strong and diverse political talent? While political scientists and the media are all too ready to debate whether or not MPs should have second jobs, or whether too many new politicians enter Parliament with no experience of the workplace beyond being a political intern or researcher for a MP, the voices of work psychologists remain conspicuous by their absence.

In this article we argue that work psychology as a discipline has much to contribute to these debates, and to more fundamental questions about the nature and importance of political work. We focus in particular on the question of why, compared with the considerable efforts and monies devoted to developing public- and private-sector leaders, so little formal support and development is available for aspiring and incumbent politicians. We suggest that while it might be easy to blame this lack of training on politicians themselves – to ascribe the apparent reluctance to admit or address

development needs to arrogance, hubris or self-interest – there may be legitimate reasons for being wary about introducing training to politics. Furthermore, we argue that while developing 'good politicians' is both a fascinating and important challenge, it also prompts questions about some of the underlying assumptions of work and performance that can limit the application of work psychology in senior, more ambiguous work roles. In short, we propose that politics and psychology have much to learn from each other.

Common sources of resistance

When we began working with politicians and political parties just over a decade ago, we were surprised by the lack of training for political roles, as well as a general resistance to the idea of formal development for politicians. Over the course of several projects we were able to capture the views of MPs, parliamentary candidates and local councillors, and three common sources of resistance

towards training and development emerged.

The first view is that politicians simply don't need training or development. This might look like arrogance (i.e. 'I am elected by the people, so why do I need training?'). But

unlike other professionals political candidates are not expected to possess a specific body of knowledge or skills. We do not insist that our politicians pass certain exams in order to be elected. In fact, the very nature of democratic process means that we assume elected representatives should be able to rely on the knowledge and expertise they have already acquired outside politics to help them perform their political roles. And where they lack certain knowledge or expertise, politicians are able to rely on the support of appointed officials, such as civil servants or local government officers, to help them make sense of political procedures and technical areas. However,

"...we were surprised by the lack of training for political roles..."

questions

Could training for politicians do more harm than good?

What can psychologists learn from politics and politicians?

resources

Inter-Parliamentary Union: www.ipu.org
 Politician personality, Machiavellianism, and political skill: tinyurl.com/nr3bmma
 BAME leaders' career experience: tinyurl.com/njlwozd

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as Weber argues, relying on the expertise of employed officers or civil servants is also problematic, because a lack of knowledge can leave politicians ‘in the position of the “dilettante” who stands opposite the “expert”’ (Weber, cited in Gerth & Mills, 1946, p.232), or at the very least less powerful than the trained officials who manage the administration. Arguably, therefore, politicians still need to know enough to be able to evaluate the information they are given, and to challenge decisions effectively if required.

The second view is that practical challenges make it difficult to provide or engage in training and development: usually insufficient time, or a lack of available resources to support training activities. Certainly political roles can require a 24/7 commitment from MPs, who need to split their time between Westminster and their local constituencies (Weinberg & Cooper, 2003). However, with 180 of the current 650 British MPs declaring second jobs that generate total earnings of more than £7.4 million (according to the *Financial Times*, 23 February 2015), it does seem that time could well be found if the motivation was there to do so. The practical challenge is probably more difficult for local politicians who, unlike MPs, are not usually paid for their roles, and by volunteering their time often struggle to maintain a balance between the demands of paid employment, family commitments, and council duties.

Potentially more problematic, albeit less discussed, are public attitudes towards spending money on training and development for politicians. This is frequently attacked in the press as an unnecessary, self-indulgent and self-serving expense on the part of elected leaders who may be in their role for relatively short periods of time, with no guarantee of re-election. Training may also be seen as a Machiavellian means for politicians to increase their power over others (Searing, 1995). Therefore, despite



Of the people, by the people, for the people?

a growing dialogue about the need to support new politicians (see Cooper-Thomas, this issue, p.364; Fox & Korris, 2012; Steinack, 2012), limited public awareness about the nature and challenges of political work remains an important barrier to the introduction of development activities.

The third reason for resisting training relates to the belief that the introduction of training and development poses a threat to democratic process. At first this appears to reflect hubris on the part of politicians (i.e. ‘I’m elected, so who are you to tell me I need training?’) But on closer inspection such resistance reflects an underlying narrative about the need to navigate a complex, ambiguous, contested environment, where power is the currency of success and politics the work by which this currency is won or lost. Thus resistance to training and development for politicians derives in part from the belief that such formal activities undermine the legitimate right of elected representatives to determine how they will enact their roles and represent the needs and views of their constituents. It’s a power struggle, about

who has the right to determine or define the content and performance of political roles. Ferris and Judge (1991) point out that human resource management systems such as training and development are political systems in their own right because they exist to perpetuate managers’ control over employees. Formal training in politics could legitimise certain types and areas of knowledge, and imply a ‘higher order’ with the power to determine the actions of elected representatives.

King (1981) argues that politicians are not professionals, because they are not expected to possess a distinct body of technical knowledge when they are elected – nor are they required to develop one once in office. Not only does this mean that politicians have the legitimate power to determine for themselves what and how they should learn, it also means that political roles can be open to individuals from all backgrounds who possess diverse knowledge and skills acquired via education, work or life experience. Put simply, formal training and development challenges Abraham Lincoln’s basic premise of democracy that government should be ‘of the people, by the people, for the people’.

Of course, this also raises an important question for work psychologists: if much of our discipline is devoted to creating systems to select, assess and develop employees that are based on prescribed managerial norms and needs, and that therefore help to strengthen managerial power and authority – does this make the discipline inherently undemocratic? More specifically, do work psychologists pay insufficient attention to the pluralistic and potentially conflicting needs and views of different groups within the workplace?

The challenge of inclusion

While there may be persuasive arguments as to why formal training for aspiring or incumbent politicians should be treated with caution, the real challenge lies in

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identifying an alternative to the current situation. At present a lack of formal development means that new politicians must rely overwhelmingly on informal strategies to learn about their roles; yet some MPs have significant advantage over others when it comes to acquiring knowledge. As shown in Cooper-Thomas's article (this issue, p.364), new MPs are socialised by sitting MPs and civil servants. However, some new MPs will have gained insider knowledge of Parliament and possible 'routes to power' before they were elected, because they have served as interns, research assistants or supporters of sitting MPs. Those who

lack access to insiders must rely on their own efforts to make sense of, and decode, observable actions of significant others. Not only is this process likely to take considerably longer, it is also much more likely to lead to embarrassing

mistakes that can reduce the likelihood of being perceived as competent and promoted to significant roles within Parliament.

Thus a key problem with these procedures is that, as we see in other organisational contexts, learning depends on gatekeepers willing to share their knowledge and understanding (Blass et al., 2007; Mann, 1995). Those with less privileged access lose out and are overtaken by those who have already developed networks. Not only does this slow learning down, it poses significant risks for diversity and inclusion (Silvester & Wyatt, in press).

There is plenty of evidence that informal ambiguity in the workplace

increases the likelihood of unfair discrimination, and reduces access to the information and political knowledge necessary to gain power and influence (cf. Eagly & Carli, 2007). We see this happen with minority groups in other work settings: for example, senior black and minority ethnic leaders in a government department described finding it more difficult to develop the knowledge and skills required for leadership positions (Wyatt & Silvester, 2015). The information required to navigate the labyrinth of complex paths to power is selectively passed via developmental relationships, informal interactions with mentors, sponsors and network contacts who are usually white males. It can be difficult for women and minority groups to gain access to these groups and thus to learn the 'rules of the game'.

Work psychologists therefore frequently introduce formal structured assessment procedures to ensure fairness, by focusing decisions on job-related competences and skills rather than on whether an individual is known by significant others. In politics, however, power and influence is both achieved and enacted through relationships. Thus patronage (i.e. being a 'favoured son or daughter': Shepherd-Robinson & Lovenduski, 2002) can significantly increase the likelihood that an individual will be chosen as a candidate for a constituency. Similarly, once they enter Parliament, patronage also helps to ensure certain new MPs have access to information that makes it easier for them to navigate the perplexing parliamentary environment. Yet this also means that those who have the power to offer patronage, and who control what information can be divulged to whom, are likely to be more resistant to formal development systems because these undermine their ability (i.e. power) to influence. Formal development may therefore serve to level the playing field. However, it may still not succeed in improving diversity and inclusion if it focuses exclusively on explicit, task-

related and technical skills without paying sufficient attention to the tacit or more secretive knowledge that individuals need to navigate their environments successfully (Doldor, 2013).

There is clearly a need to address the lack of diversity in politics. After the last general election black and minority ethnic individuals comprised 4 per cent and women 23 per cent of MPs (and just four of the 23 cabinet ministers) in the House of Commons (Keep, 2010), a figure that placed the UK 60th in the world in terms of female parliamentary representation, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union. The Equality and Human Rights Commission estimates that it will take as many as 14 elections to achieve gender parity at national level. Similar figures are found at local level where 32 per cent of elected councillors are women. As formal development activities equalise access to task-related, technical skills and implicit knowledge, they should also increase the speed at which new MPs (particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds) make the transition into Parliament. Formal development is therefore a strategy that should be pursued.

In fact, significant efforts were made to respond to the need for more formal provision of political development in local government following the election of a Labour government in 1997. Facilitated by establishment of the Improvement and Development Agency (more recently the Local Government Association), councillor development activities were initiated, such as the Next Generation for Talented Councillors programme, which aims to train and develop councillors in the workings of government and support them to progress in their political careers. A number of other initiatives were also introduced, such as toolkits and peer mentoring to support development of political skills amongst councillors (Silvester & Menges, 2011). Although advances were made in promoting the need for training and development, many of these efforts suffered in cuts after the financial crisis in 2008.



It will take as many as 14 elections to achieve gender parity at national level

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Therefore, despite lack of need and the threat to democratic process being cited as reasons for not engaging in training and development, there clearly is a case for greater provision of formal development for politicians, which may act as a mechanism to enhance the fairness and diversity of the democratic process. Korris (2014) argues that party leaders need to insist that their new MPs make time to train, oppose the training-resistant culture, and to stand up to the media. Yet there remains the practical challenge of how to identify the areas of knowledge and skill required by politicians in general and design learning activities that accommodate a much broader range of knowledge, skills and abilities than typically found in an employee group (Silvester, 2012; Silvester & Dykes, 2007).

Practical next steps

There appears to be growing recognition that new MPs in particular need more support. In their review of British MPs entering Parliament for the first time in 2010, Fox and Korris (2012) found that while most knew a lot about being a constituency MP from their time campaigning as parliamentary candidates, few had thought much beyond the point of being elected; either because they had been too busy campaigning or for fear of tempting fate (or appearing hubristic) by assuming they would win. A recent BBC 'fly-on-the-wall' programme, which followed those who work in the British Houses of Parliament, provided an excellent insight into the realities of political workings that appear, on the one hand, as steeped in ritual, history and tradition, and on the other, as nothing less than a shambolic collection of ad hoc and often unnecessary practices. It is easy to understand why there are calls for the professionalisation of Parliament, including the introduction of modern business practices reminiscent of 'customer service' and 'efficiency'. Yet Parliament is not a business and care must be taken to understand the unique nature of work within a legislature in order to understand how to modernise practices whilst preserving tradition and respecting democratic process (Silvester & Spicer, 2014).

Most importantly, if formal development opportunities are to be offered, care needs to be taken to determine *what* and *how* politicians need to learn. It may not be possible or desirable for new politicians to have equivalent technical knowledge in areas like finance or operations, but they will

need a broad understanding of how government works (including constitutional procedures) and how to work effectively in their local political context. Arguably, politicians also need to be able to deal with competing groups, conflicted interests, and powerful lobbyists, and be able to navigate their environment and achieve their objectives. So political development poses a fascinating challenge; how would we address it?

Firstly, we believe that it is important to improve inclusive learning opportunities for aspiring politicians who lack access to informal sources of information and learning about political roles. To do so much could be learned from existing shadowing schemes and leadership programmes like those offered by Operation Black Vote, an organisation that aims to enhance ethnic minority political engagement and skills. Secondly, we argue that the political parties need to recognise the importance of development and commit to supporting learning opportunities for new and aspiring politicians. These might involve widening participation in schemes such as the Political Mentoring Programme, launched by the Local Government Group in 2006 (see Silvester & Menges, 2011), and the introduction of formal induction or on-boarding programmes for politicians at local and national level.

We also believe that there is a need to build broader awareness of the knowledge and skills that are important for political roles and to improve cross-party (and potentially non-party) access to activities that can support their development. Although existing work in local government has identified core competences for councillor roles (see tinyurl.com/qdbel8) more work needs to be done to embed these into learning and training activities and to support their continual evaluation and implementation. It is also important to recognise and protect the legitimate right that politicians have to choose to engage (or not) in development. This means that greater effort should be placed on helping politicians and aspiring politicians to understand how and why learning can enhance their democratic power rather than diminish it. To facilitate politician-led development more use could be made of feedback provided via 360-degree review procedures that allow politicians to identify potential raters and where feedback can remain anonymous and confidential (see Silvester et al., 2014). Although the act of providing feedback remains inherently political, this type of method, where politicians (rather than

managers) 'own' feedback, can reduce the perceived threat to the democratic process. Equally important is the need for much greater public awareness of the demands, challenges and importance of political roles; as well as more recognition of the need for funding and support for formal training and development.

However, we also argue that there is a critical need for work psychologists to recognise and understand the inherently political nature of learning and development and work more generally. This might include embedding power and politics as core knowledge areas for professional training in work psychology. By relinquishing the widely subscribed assumption that there is a single 'objective' view of work performance, for example, it becomes possible to recognise that politicians (as well as senior professionals in other fields) require the freedom to shape and communicate their own personal definitions of what good performance looks like in their roles.

Finally, there is a need for more focus on what business leaders can learn from politicians. While research into the political skill of managers is burgeoning (Ferris et al., 2012), for example, relatively little draws explicit links with politicians and political work. It is not just politicians who need to navigate complex environments, manage opposing views and mobilise coalitions of support, and we might learn a great deal from politicians that is pertinent to the political nature of senior organisational positions. Politics reminds us that knowledge is power and that those who hold or control access to knowledge also have the potential to change the balance of power, and to determine who else can achieve power and influence. We remain convinced that the field of psychology as a whole has much to offer the political domain, but it is equally important that work psychologists recognise their own roles as political actors in the workplace.



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