

## Looking at the MCDC leadership development experience from multiple perspectives

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This paper consists of the following sections, each with a distinctive intention, drawing on interviews with four sponsors, four facilitator tutors, four participants and two email submissions by participants.

- Section 1 (pages 2 to 7) is '**An Executive Summary**' and provides a synthesis of insights from all perspectives and is intended as a reference point for all those involved in the programme to get a flavor of what was distinctive about the MCDC LDP
- Section 2 (pages 8 to 12) is a 1700 word piece advocating '**The Value Leadership Development Can Deliver to Leaders in Health Research**' and '**How Leadership Development Can Deliver Value to Leaders in Health Research**'. It provides a resource to aid participants in their reflections on the developmental experience they've just completed, and also provide the basis for a blog and/or supporting material for future bids for leadership development funds (by participants associated with MCDC and/or for Quilibra)
- Section 3 (pages 13 to 34) is a '**Comprehensive Narrative**' and contains the underlying data and analysis that underpins the other two sections. It also provides material for MCDC and Quilibra to do their own sense making and the opportunity for them to generate further material

## **1. An Executive Summary**

This executive summary consists of:

- An Overview
- An Assessment of the Value the LDP Delivered to MCDC
- The critical success factors in achieving value from investing in LDP in MCDC
- A theoretical assessment of why the LDP worked in the MCDC context

### **1.1 Overview**

The LDP was responding to an expressed need for leadership development from people in the field. It built on the work done in the previous years by the Malaria Capacity Development Consortium (MCDC) to encourage people to think about their development above and beyond their specific medical and research capabilities. In a surprisingly short time a robust learning community was established, where facilitators and participants acted as co-learners, and people embraced the experimental nature of the process – which connected up the theory and examples of the workshops, to the complex reality of their home institutions and which did not advocate a universal, true model of leadership.

People also embraced the practical value of being in a group with people of diverse experience and seniority, valuing what each could learn from each other's distinctive reality. They were also willing to explore their personal realities and drivers in an environment where it felt safe to share intimate details of what made them the leaders and people they were.

The process also provided people with valued and flexibly available coaching support and access to a diversity of insight from non-medical and/or non-African institutions. An essential ingredient was the credibility of the facilitator team, whose breadth and depth of leadership experience gave participants confidence to suspend their doubts and step wholeheartedly into a development process very different to their usual experience of education (i.e. one based on quantitative data delivered by experts, who own the truth).

## 1.2 An Assessment of the Value the LDP Delivered to MCDC

An assessment in the form of a composite of quotes from participants:

*“... Helped me identify my strengths and weaknesses... Most importantly, I now have a better understanding of my work environment and how to interact with... peers, juniors and seniors... helped me most [in] setting up collaborations and dealing with competing interests... [It] helped me find useful solutions”*

*“... I have significantly reduced my stress levels, even though I'm doing even more work... I am able to see how the world looks from the perspectives of each [of three] institutions... I can put myself in their shoes... I've learned to lead in a pro-active manner, before I went about [it] passively... my coach brought me relief... when I was feeling overwhelmed”*

The LDP has significantly improved the personal effectiveness of participants in their local settings, has established a learning community which serves as a communal resource to draw on and provided people with critical specific knowledge, from finance to being a working mother.

In terms of personal effectiveness what stands out is:

- The increase in self-confidence, in the eyes of the facilitators, and how this has translated into a more proactive style of leadership
- People have learned how to engage better with complex and delicate organisational settings, including:
  - How to deliver projects that cut across multiple institutions without stepping on people's toes
  - How to navigate and survive management scandals
  - How to constructively, rather than dismissively, engage with people who used to be senior in terms of career
  - Finding ways of bringing on people who everyone else had given up on
- Because people have become much more aware of their personal triggers and instinctive preferences, as well as those of people around them, they have become much more skilled at responding to situations in a considered, rather

than knee-jerk, fashion. People know better how to lead others and be led themselves. They are able to exercise conscious choice about how best to engage with situations, rather than be in thrall to what they have learned from their experience

### **1.3 The critical success factors in achieving value from investing in LDP in MCDC**

An assessment in the form of a composite of quotes from participants:

*“... The facilitators... were very good at helping us come out of our shells... coming*



*together in workshops, learning together and the going back to practice in the workplace... sharing what worked and what was still a struggle”*

*“... Having access to coaches at any time... pushing the clay to the limit of resistance, risking destruction... facilitators helped create an environment of equality within the group. I’m a bit shy but... I was able to speak freely... we were willing to experiment”*

The success of the LDP can be understood in terms of the following aspects:

- The context for the programme
- The attitude of participants
- The design of the programme
- The learning philosophy
- The credibility of facilitators

a) The context of the programme... leadership development does not exist in a vacuum. The LDP came at a particular time in the evolution of the MCDC, when its orientation was much more about embedding sustainable capability across Africa and so had to embrace the reality of diverse contexts and institutional reality – so the

possible lure of advocating some ‘one size fits all’/universalist approach was not on the cards.

Work had also been done to encourage people to explore their development needs more broadly, to look at more than an immediate focus on medical and laboratory skills, and pay attention to their institutional and local context. People had also reached a stage in their careers where this need was also a pressing personal need.

b) The attitude of participants... there was a willingness to engage with the process, to embrace the experimental nature of the learning and not stay attached to any initial scepticism. For people who are well versed in the quantitative scientific tradition, they were willing to work with insights that come from a qualitative perspective. Members of the group were also willing to open themselves up and create an invitational and appreciative mood, where everybody’s contribution was heard and people felt that their insights (even though they might have seen themselves as more junior) were taken seriously.

Participants were also willing and able to step into their responsibilities as co-creators of the learning process, helping shape how work was done in the various group configurations and what was paid more or less attention to – and not simply going along with what was originally proposed by the facilitators.

c) The design of the programme... the programme was designed to allow people to be deeply reflective about their taken for granted way of leading, to see how this had developed and to explore how it would need to shift in the future. This future focus was experimental and practical, with the workshops being interspersed with opportunities to practice new ways of being within their actual, local contexts.

Because the programme took place over 18 months, it encouraged development to unfold in time with the reality of what could actually shift both personally and organisationally. To go with this practical rhythm, the programme gave timely inputs around specific technical skills such as finance and gave people ‘on demand’ access to coaching support (rather than scheduling one on one coaching support to fit with the convenience of the coaches)

d) The learning philosophy... the programme took people's experience seriously and also treated their ability to learn from each other as a valuable, if not the critical, resource. The focus for learning was not based around the one-way communication of expert knowledge from tutors to students. The programme took the process of digesting and making personal sense of learning as more figural than the advocacy of expert insight (although expert insight was present in short, sharp pieces of focused input). The philosophy also took a systemic perspective, valuing insights from different positions within the hierarchy of organisational structures, and bringing together people from a cross-section of leadership positions – rather than focusing solely on one specific positional perspective.



Lastly its learning philosophy privileged the reality of diverse local contexts, rather than an abstracted, ideal model – so located the responsibility for sense making and action with participants, who had to own the translation of insights into practice.

e) The credibility of facilitators... the fact that the facilitators had a track record of working with senior leaders from many significant organisations from around the world, helped people step into this relatively alien learning and development experience. The facilitators also were true to the learning philosophy, creating a contract with the group where they could be accepted and valued as co-learners, while still being respected as experts in the field of leadership. They were also able to engage with intimate personal details of people's lives, without being experienced as prying.

#### **1.4 A theoretical assessment of why the LDP worked in the MCDC context**

The LDP experience can be understood by drawing on three particular insights into what it takes for human beings to learn individually and together.

The first insight comes from the work of David Casey (Casey, 1987) who wrote a seminal work in the field of personal development with the title “Breaking the shell that encloses your understanding”. This notion that meaningful development requires people to let go of some established ways of being in the world can be seen in the metaphorical observation of one participant, to them the LDP had the qualities of being worked like clay in making ceramics, where “*the firing process [requires] pushing the clay to the limit of resistance, risking destruction*”.

People knew themselves differently as a result of the programme, they all explored the roots of what made them the person they were, by exploring the river of their life history, and the drivers that led them to behave as they did, they could reflect on what needed to be worked with, built on and let go of.

The second insight comes from the work of Megan Reitz (Reitz, 2015) with her work into what it takes for organisations to embrace a culture of dialogue and relational leadership, where her ending insight that “... *being human is knowing what it is to be in relation to others*” (P 239). The LDP started with a focus on the participants as people in the round, rather than by focusing on the single abstraction of them as people who are organisational leaders. By encouraging people to explore themselves in conversation with their fellow participants, the LDP created an environment where people witnessed each other and experienced being in intimate relation with each other. This experience of being in relation with each other was at the root of what allowed a robust learning community to develop.

The last insight is raised in my own work with Kathleen King (King & Higgins, 2014) where we draw on the organisational implications of the work of family therapist Barry Mason; our insight being that “... *we need to support people to feel safe enough to deal with the uncertainty of the situation*” (P11). Mason’s work revealed how the temptation can be to create the illusion of safe certainty, which cannot exist in human society, and is an active barrier to development. Similarly an environment of unsafe uncertainty terrifies people into immobility. What the LDP achieved was an environment where the unpredictability and uncertainty of people’s local contexts was acknowledged and worked with, while the programme – through its development of a sense of community, the provision of technical skills and the availability of

individual support on an as-needed basis – created a safe enough container for people to feel able to explore new ways of being and acting.

## 2. The Value Leadership Development Can Deliver to Leaders in Health Research

Done well, leadership development can open the eyes of leaders in health research to the following:

- How to influence and manage the context for health research
- How to experience the value of qualitative reality
- How to deal with the consequences of data not speaking for itself

### *a) How to influence and manage the context for health research*

Meaningful health research exists to tackle deeply rooted and complex health problems, such as malaria. To make a lasting impact on the disease requires a persistent, and long-term commitment, to focusing on work in the laboratory and to establishing the institutional framework to support and sustain both the scientific research and its translation into health outcomes in the field.

The translation of research into health outcomes has to take place within the diverse contexts of all the national cultures, of the effected countries, and their different institutional structures and practices. Leadership is therefore about working collaboratively with many partners to achieve a shared ambition, but where there will be many different ways of achieving that ambition within locally negotiated settings.

Collaborative leadership requires a great deal of subtlety and sophistication; it is as much, if not more, a political art rather than an exercise in scientific reason. The temptation can be to try and impose a single approach, but even if this works for a short time it cannot be sustained as it has no roots in the local culture – and as the saying goes ‘culture eats strategy [and every other idealized and imposed interpretation of reality] for breakfast’.

Senior health researchers will already know a lot about their home culture, the point of leadership development is to help them see the personal strengths they have to build on, identify the social and economic support they will need, and establish a network of trusted peers who can help them think through situations that remain largely un-discussible with colleagues in their home setting.

*b) How to experience the value of qualitative reality*

For people who are experts within the scientific research tradition, taking qualitative data seriously can be difficult. Many prefer to try and impose the scientific method onto the world, an exemplar being Cambridge University's Simon Baron-Cohen and his description of what counts as change in his best seller *Zero Degrees of Empathy*.

Development programs are however almost, probably completely, impossible to carry out in a way that fits with the rules of the laboratory. Until the day comes that the world outside of the lab can be made to fit with world of the lab, we are left to engage with a qualitative world – where human beings negotiate power, exercise influence over each other and pursue noble and ignoble goals in noble and ignoble ways.

The challenge is not to get into a philosophical argument over methods, enjoyable though they can be to academics, but to embrace the world of radical pragmatism (a school of thought put forward by the American thinker and writer Richard Rorty). His advocacy is that the question to ask about a course of action in the social sphere is 'Is it useful?' Which is different from the more philosophical debate around whether or not a particular insight is 'true'. In the social setting of organisations and relational life truth is a slippery concept... when it comes to working with leadership frames it's the lived usefulness that convinces people to make use of a particular approach.

To get scientific researchers to step into this qualitative and ambiguous world requires them to take a leap of faith, that is usually best enabled when accompanied by someone who has credibility in their eyes. This credibility comes from that accompanist having a public track record impressive enough to allow them to give this different approach to learning and development a go.

*c) How to deal with the consequences of data not speaking for itself*

One of the characteristics of working in a qualitative world is that it is highly descriptive and its findings are riddled with uncertainty. Most human communication, and hence most leadership, takes place through the medium of words – even the

interpretation of numbers happens through words, which is why conversational leadership is coming into fashion at the moment.

The hope that many people carry is that words can be given a definitive and fixed meaning, much as numbers can. But words are living things and meaning making through language is a constant negotiation (and can even feel like a battle).

Leaders develop certain habits that can give them the false comfort of shared understanding. Firstly there is the habit of interpreting silence as agreement, which it very rarely is – silence is more often a function of people not wanting to embarrass themselves in the presence of a powerful other, or put themselves into some form of social or professional jeopardy (for more on this refer to Megan Reitz & John Higgins' recent Ashridge blog on 'Speaking Truth to Power'). Secondly in the spirit of efficiency and getting through the agenda of a meeting, people very rarely take the time to stop and check in with the meaning that others are making of what is being said – people assume that people have a shared rather than diverse sense making habit (this finding comes from the analysis by John Higgins of responses from over 75 teams to The Right Conversations 'Team Conversational Norms Diagnostic').

For leaders brought up in the scientific tradition this ambiguous world can be a trial as it goes against so much of their professional training. Learning to accept it and work with it is an essential requirement if health researchers are to exercise influence in the world outside of the lab.

### **How Leadership Development Can Deliver Value to Leaders in Health Research**

The Critical Success Factors for delivering programmes that will make a difference to leaders in significant areas of health research are:

*a) It needs to be delivered by people who are credible in the eyes of participants... to overcome skepticism towards qualitative data and research*

In order to get people to take the leap of faith, to suspend their judgment, and step into an experimental frame of mind, leadership development must be delivered by

people who have credibility in the eyes of participants. What counts as credibility is in the eye of the beholder and however tempting cannot be ignored or sidestepped.

*b) It needs to be congruent with an organisation's existing development culture*

To be valued, potential participants need to have become aware of the need to exercise influence outside of the boundaries of a research community – and to engage with a world of politics and personalities. The MCDC LDP programme worked because there was a demand for it from people across the MCDC network; their careers had reached a point where the need to engage with complex leadership contexts and issues could not be avoided

*c) Be designed to work with the natural mindset of an experimenter... giving time and opportunity for people to apply insights within the practical reality of their context*



What gives the language, insights and models of leadership development credibility is the personal experience of putting them to use – of finding out what does and doesn't work in their local context. For leadership development to deliver value it has to be part of an integrated learning cycle, where insights

are turned into practical action and the intended and unintended consequences of these actions are noticed and consciously learned from – preferably in the company of colleagues who can help people see what they might otherwise overlook

*d) Starts with the self*

People need to start their development as leaders by becoming conscious of their sources of preference and how others, within and outside the research community, have different preferences. The temptation can be, when not explicitly paid attention to, to assume that your way of seeing the world is the only and right way of knowing the world. During the early part of a career people will find a way of going about their

work that works for them – when work is a singular activity this can be a great strength.

As soon as you have to take a lead in influencing, directing and coordinating the actions of others, then the understanding of the variety of human motivation becomes an essential quality – and the first step is to see how your personal, subjective judgments will lead you to make certain assumptions about how people will respond and engage with a task.

*e) Looks to engage with collective wisdom and knowledge*

By bringing together people who have a shared professional context there is an opportunity for development to happen in a context of respected support and challenge i.e. alongside people who can be professionally as well as personally respected. But an essential quality of valuable support and challenge is that there is also sufficient difference in the group, so that leaders do not fall into the trap of seeing the world solely through the lens of their particular position in the organisational hierarchy. In addition to this need for positional diversity, it is very important that people are exposed to experiences that draw on the realities of different social and ethnic realities.

For the great thinker Gregory Bateson, author of *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, learning can be equated with ‘news of difference’ and for leaders to develop they need to be exposed to, be capable of engaging with, and take on experience that doesn’t simply replicate what they already think and know.

*f) Avoids advocating an imported, one size fits all model*

The leadership development field is dominated by the great US Business Schools – and unsurprisingly they are soaked in the US cultural stereotype of universalism (see *Riding the Waves of Culture* by Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner for more on this), the belief that there is a single best way of seeing the world that can be deployed irrespective of local situation and culture. There is little evidence to support the view that this works in practice and much recent modern history demonstrates the deeply damaging consequences of seeing the world this way.

Leadership is a complex social activity that reflects local ethics, culture and values. It has to fit with the specifics of local institutional custom and practice – and work with the reality of people who have very different personalities. To borrow from the old cliché, the map (i.e the leadership model) is not the territory (i.e. the real world where leading takes place).

### 3. Comprehensive Narrative

Making sense of a leadership development programme is a complicated activity where there are always many perspectives reflecting:

- The immediate experience of participants of development activities and the immediate and longer term effects on their leadership practice
- The intentions of the sponsors of the programme, the institutional context within which the development is taking place, the design philosophy of the deliverers of the programme and their skill at connecting their leadership development expertise to the unique situation of participants
- The perspective of the external reviewer and their own skills at engaging with all parties and making sense of the experience as a whole

#### 3.1 The participant stories

##### a) A development metaphor

Two of the participants visited the Victoria & Albert museum in London as one of their development activities. One of them shared this response to my questions about their experience of being on the programme and its impact on their practice as a leader.

In terms of the experience of the programme, they sent me a picture of a sculpture by French artist Theobald Chague (not included here for copyright reasons) and pointed me towards the following narrative that accompanied the piece:

*“... the physical acts of making have conceptual or philosophical dimensions. He describes the firing process as pushing the clay to the limit of resistance, risking destruction. For Chague, this is a necessary part of the creative process, the fissuring that may occur revealing the energy contained within the forms”*

Reviewer commentary: This equates to me to the notion of creative destruction (originally coined by Joseph Schumpeter when talking about the process of innovation) and which David Casey spoke to in the field of leadership development when he wrote about the need for “breaking the shell that encloses your

understanding” (Casey, 1987) – development activity carries within it a risk, that those undertaking it will be damaged, taken beyond what they can endure... it is usual, therefore, that development activity errs on the side of caution, leaving people relatively untouched, reinforcing their sense of comfort and not taking them to their edge. The language of ‘*pushing the clay*’ to its limits’ speaks to a more profound developmental experience in this case.

In terms of impact on actual and evolving leadership practice the following text was identified from the visit to the V&A:

*“... Making ceramics is often seen as two distinct stages: the shaping by hand of the raw material, and its surrender to the transformative forces of the kiln. For many makers, their engagement with the physicality of these processes is a central concern. Gesture and expression become of great importance. Forms are often determined by simple repeated actions, or by the physical forces associated with the process of making. Such work often combines raw energy with a sense of poetic expression”*

Reviewer commentary: For leadership development to have an impact it has to be brought to life in the red-hot reality of the day-to-day. To be a leader, to be part of an organisational process in which people lead and are led requires people to engage in the subtlety of day-to-day interaction, the physical reality of being part of a complicated social community... and the act of becoming an effective leader comes about through persistence and repetition, leading is not about the grand gestures, the one off actions, it is about being who you are as a leader in all the moment-to-moment conversations and interactions you have with people around you.

The LDP allowed people to shape themselves in the cool of the workshops, test themselves in the fire of their situations and find better ways of being present as people who lead and people who were led.

### **b) The specifics of activity and impact on practice – two personal written narratives**

*“The LDP has helped me to identify my strengths and weakness, even though its*

*based on qualitative research, I feel that these are things that have really shaped my past... the decisions I have made and I continue to reflect on these strengths and weaknesses. Most importantly, I now have a better understanding of my work environment and how to interact with my work mates - peers, juniors and seniors and I'm so glad that this is an area that we put so much emphasis on. It came at a time when I had problems setting up collaborations and I must say, it worked like magic.*

*Talking to Samreen about these issues was very helpful - I truly appreciate the power of mentorship. I have also learned to be focused and feel I am better organised, [even] diplomatic... which to be honest I never was [before]. I always believed that my values are the best - but I guess I couldn't impose them on others and that's not the way the world works - I have learnt to meet people halfway. In meetings, I'm very cautious while at the same time allowing others to express themselves. Before I was the outspoken one and that would allow people to judge me.....*

*But I must also say that mentorship is an important aspect in leadership - mentors help you see things differently and engage your mind from an outward perspective [that] is very useful when you have to make critical decisions.*

*The exchange program was the best - my exchange trip was fantastic and I learnt so much from someone I aspire to be like! From the leadership perspective, I consider it an important field/practical visit. I only wish I could compare this person to others who are considered ruthless leaders - well that won't happen. But I would have loved to compare two leadership skills - the good and the bad one (but all the same successful individuals)*

*It was very interesting that Quilibra brought in the financial aspect of leadership - I think being financially stable is important and I took that very seriously! One thing I can say is that in Africa, we or I personally tend to face financial instability and this really affects your work and leadership capability. I have been trying to invest and now know the importance of it - thanks to the brief lecture we had on finance".*

Reviewer commentary: ...even though the LDP was based on qualitative research it worked like magic... could it be that it is by focusing on the qualities of relating that this participant was able to find a way through a very complex set of relationships

and difficult situations? And it was useful to blend this qualitative perspective with some very specific technical skills i.e. around Finance.

The LDP seems to have found a way of blending together what are traditionally called hard and soft skills in a way that gave people practical skills in relating to others and understanding money.

### ... a second written narrative

*“At the beginning of the programme I was struggling a bit with how to manage the different parts of the relatively increased work I had recently begun to do concurrently. I had some challenges with organising it all without feeling overwhelmed from time to time and leaving out some important bits when the stress levels got really high. I had tried using various methods, mainly manual, with some level of success but was not quite there. During the programme the facilitators introduced us to various ways of managing our activities using a calendar and offered advice on how to handle competing demands which has been extremely helpful... I have significantly reduced my stress levels, even though I am doing even more work than I used to do. I also got a book on being productive with minimal stress that I read with interest. It was well suited to my situation... What has been most useful for me in my context has been a chance to take a step back, look at my journey so far to this point and appreciate those who have contributed to that journey at different times. I have had an opportunity to talk to others in contexts very similar to mine, heard about some of their challenges, learnt from some of the good things they were doing that was helping them. I have also had an opportunity, beyond learning from my peers, to learn from facilitators with a variety of strengths”.*

Reviewer commentary: This participant focused on the benefits of finding some very technical ways to manage their time... and once they had learned to contain their diary, so they were able to focus on developing the skill of reflection. Once again the LDP combined practical know-how with a more qualitative discipline.

### **c) What stood out from conversations with participants (translated from spoken interviews to written record)**

*“... The programme made a very great difference... made me view things more broadly... I tend now to stand aside and view things three dimensionally... I step outside of the situation and see things from all corners, see all the positions and possibilities... and the challenges before I take my steps”*

*“... It has taken me from somewhere where I don't know myself... where I'd take decisions without making myself part of the three dimensions... now I know more of myself, I know how my drivers impact me and I know that such drivers are not a weakness... and that certain environmental conditions light me up... I can't get rid of them, but I can function better... for me the important driver I came to know was to 'Please Others'... so I make my routine flexible and take on others agendas when I could have been freer to reject some of their activities... combined with a 'Be Perfect' driver that made me very busy... and I'd have to catch up with my own deadlines”*

What did you value in the group?

*“The variety... the group was so free, so open... we could compare our drivers... I was more junior and the more senior could bring in the more senior arguments... the facilitators helped create an environment of equality within the group... I didn't feel like a junior person... whenever a concept was introduced I could talk or listen... it was as if we were a group of individuals from a similar level... I'm a bit shy talking to people but by the second and third workshops I was able to speak freely and after talking I'd feel appreciated... I was adding knowledge to the group”*



On the style of the 'teaching'

*“It was not like a teacher giving a lecture, where they create a situation where they are superior and the student is inferior... in the group you were given a task, a concept, and then time to think about it... given time to reflect, someone to walk and talk with... and for some reason that created strong connections... everyone was*

*coming up with experiences that were different to each other... it wasn't about one person sitting, full of knowledge... and the faculty learnt from us... we were the first group of scientists at our level that they'd worked with... it was a new set-up to them... and this was the same feeling in the feedback to peers... it gave me the impression something was being taken by them"*

On valuable insights

*"The importance and value of reflection... if you are in a situation and there is no reflection, then everyone is looking to jump in and make decisions that they wouldn't have done if they'd taken some time... by getting us to look at our drivers and how they influence our decisions so the need for reflection before action became clear... and so also the need to reflect on my history and how that influenced me, how I lived as a child... what happened between my early years and in my teens and in my early adult years... I really looked at what it was that made me as I am now... and then I went and walked and talked about it, saying what it was I now knew about myself"*

*"I was surprised that it took such a short time to learn so much... its had an impact on what I know about leadership, what I know about my peers and what I know about my children"*

On seeing the world three dimensionally

*"The three dimensions are... the WORK dimension... the RELATIONSHIP dimension... and the PERSONAL dimension"*

On working better in complex local setting (and the LDP coming at the right time)

*"I work in a setting where there are three different institutions... and where I need to fit in with all three... the College, the Hospital and the Research Institute... I don't want people to experience me as meddling in their areas, such as on the Wards, but I have projects that cut across all three of the institutions and I have to work well with the various realities of organisational politics... I am able to see how the world looks from the perspective of one of the Managers or Directors of each institute... I can put myself in their shoes"*

On the experience of the faculty

*“They had this huge experience with them... so much that was applicable to our context... they all had this experience of working across boundaries and cultures”*

The difference the LDP made

*“I now lead in a more informed way, better than the intuitive approach I’d used ‘til now... to lead others you need to learn to lead yourself... I’ve learned to lead in a pro-active manner, before I went about leadership passively... I’m trying to look at different types of leadership and how they can be applied to my context’*

*“There’s one professor in the Department, senior to me in terms of career, now I have the challenge of leading them... and they have good insight, knowledge and a contribution to make... I have found a way to handle and hear their ideas... and sometimes he’s right about a critical manner... now I’m able to respond and engage him, before the LDP I wouldn’t have known how to handle him... I’ve learned to take my time and not to rush... the previous me would not have listened to him and would have chucked him out of my office! Now I can listen to him calmly.”*

What have you learned about yourself?

*“A lot... the drivers! It offered real opportunity for reflection... and from the first workshop lots of practical suggestions... by understanding what drove me it helped me reflect on particular situations... now I tend not to rush... now I analyse before I implement... I have learnt that I am able to slow down and still make progress”*

What did your fellow participants give you?

*“They’re like the type of people I have to lead! It was okay to share and be vulnerable... they were willing to be critical of the issues I brought to work on and to bring in very good ideas and solutions I’d never have thought of... they helped me find useful solutions”*



What did the facilitators give?

*“They had open-ness... they were able to build trust with us... very open and very business like... they made sure from Day 1 that we were trying to achieve what we set out to achieve... they were business like in setting out what was to be covered and in explaining that we all needed to participate... and they were available to me, to nurture me along through the programme”*

What was most difficult?

*“Being level about myself... I knew that there were certain things I had to change... I had to acknowledge this before I could take the steps I needed to take... I had to share things which were personally worrying for me... and I tend to keep myself to myself and create solutions for myself”*

What made it safe to be different to how you usually are?

*“They, the facilitators, were experts and knew what they were doing... and there was no running away! I realised I could get something from each of them... and they’d done this type of work before... if other high profile people had trusted them and trusted their growth to them then I was willing to take the risk and trust them with my growth”*

What made the group work?

*“We were willing to experiment... to open ourselves up to people we didn’t know personally... and just to see how things played out... it was different to anything I’d done before, but different in good way”*

*“I drew on my coach, Bruno... he quickly latched on to who we were without being intrusive... he was able to give me practical advice, things I could do and then left it to me to use or not use that advice... his advice brought me a lot of relief, especially in our 1:1 conversations when I was feelings overwhelmed with demands... he helped me see what was most important and needed to be worked on first... he helped me not to get cluttered in my mind... he was good at drawing things out from their context so you could use it in your context... Samreen was more reflective... and Anthony brought lots of experience around practical leadership things and experience from other world leaders”*

*“The whole group felt like a family... and Bruno is part of that group... and we continue to learn and share together”*

A specific situation

*“There was this one person who was a challenge, I couldn’t figure him out and what to do with him... lots of others in the organisation had given up on him... I was determined to get him to the level I thought he could be at... by changing how I responded to him, so he responded differently to me and he’s making progress, not as fast as I want, but he’s making progress!”*

The structure of the programme

*“Coming together in the workshops, learning together and then going back to practice in the workplace... then sharing and celebrating what worked and what was still a struggle... and having access to the coaches at any time... there was an open invitation to call whenever we wanted”*

What difference did the LDP make?

*“It improved skills I already had... made me more aware of them... it really helped to improve on my capacity to lead and my capacity to be led... helped me interact better with people below and above me”*

What did the group give?

*“Help me understand how others think about and respond to leadership issues... what they did and didn't see as a problem in their situations... helped me think about how to manage my bosses”*

*“The workshops were not typical... the facilitators were learning from us! Their focus was on helping us to get better at what we do... there was lots of sharing... they were very good at helping us to come out of our shells”*



What did you most value?

*“The Action Learning... I found it very valuable... helped me understand issues*

Reviewer commentary: To lead others people need to know themselves, they need to know how to lead themselves and not just be at the mercy of their triggers and learnt behaviours... they need to know how they fit within a context and how that context must look to other actors within it... they must know the world through the lenses of self-knowledge, relational skill and local realities.

### **3.2 The perspective of sponsors and deliverers**

In the eyes of MCDC sponsors and the Quilibra team, the following impact has been seen on participants, personally and collectively:

i) An understanding of their unique approach to leadership

*'It has been a profound experience for participants... effecting how they work and live more broadly... some have learnt humility, others have learnt to let go of unhelpful beliefs they held about themselves'*

The programme was explicitly positioned as one that did not provide a formulaic, standardised and recommended approach to leading teams, departments and institutions involved in malarial research across Africa. All participants have embraced a personal understanding of what experiences and expertise they already have to draw on when it comes to being successful leaders within their specific situation. They have identified how they need to work with who they are, the relationships they're part of and the cultural reality of their local context.

While they have been informed by insights and expert knowledge made available during the programme, they have embraced the reality that their unique professional, personal and social situations requires them to find a way of leading that is unique to them in their own here and now.

ii) The application of their unique approach across a breadth of contexts

*'People have changed how they interact with colleagues/peers, people they manage, how they are at home and how they are in the wider world'*

For some/many participants the impact of the programme has not simply been in terms of their organisational life. Any programme that invites people to reflect rigorously on their sense of self and how this sense of self plays out in their relationships with other's, is bound to impact on all of their social interactions. Participants reported that they were now different at home and in how they engaged with their families, how they engaged with their wider social network – even how they participated in and exercised influence within their Church.

iii) The development of personal confidence

*'The biggest observed difference is an increase in participants self-confidence... they were already very capable people who now appear much more self-assured and grounded... bolder... more poised... more willing to try things'*

Grounded confidence was observed in many participants. Whereas they have been very well trained scientifically, even those who were in senior organisational posts might well have suffered from 'imposter syndrome' – to a greater or lesser extent. Their exposure to the human sciences and the people aspects of leading teams and heading up programmes/departments, having been largely learnt on the hoof – people were certainly hungry to learn about the people and institutional aspects of being in a leadership position.

This programme helped people develop an embedded sense of capability, which reflected its more than a year long nature and the on-going coaching and peer support, in contrast to other leadership trainings which consisted of a few periodic and standardised workshops.

#### iv) The development of a bigger perspective

*'What I saw in particular was a broadening of perspective, of how they saw themselves, their contexts and the wider world... they realised how much more they could do... the programme opened their eyes to the range and scale of choice available to them'*

The participants in the programme were already researchers of the very highest calibre... the challenge the programme presented was how these skills could be amplified and played out on a bigger stage, by bringing on the next generation of researchers and supporting the development of the institutional infrastructure which will deliver the sustainable, African based, approach to malarial control.



It also raised people's attention to the need to work with other third parties (such as Pharmaceutical companies) and agencies, if their professional goals were to be achieved, and the leadership challenges presented in working with these third parties.

v) The application of insights into the nitty-gritty of their local situations

*'It worked with the "boring" reality of their day-to-day stuff... it was grounded in people's reality'*

Leading is by and large not a big and glamorous activity, it takes place in the day-to-day interactions people have with each other, the conversations they have, the emails they send – and how skilful and



personally present people are in these interactions. Being an effective leader is not conceptually difficult, the frameworks that proved of value were easily understood – if not so easy to put to use. Paying attention to the difference between what is important and what is urgent is an essential quality of good leaders for example, and something easily forgotten about in the midst of the day to day.

Developing as a leader is learning how to pay attention to obvious everyday patterns, organisational and personal, and learning to let go of, or challenge with suitable political sensitivity, those patterns that do not serve the overall research goal.

Learning to do this is something best learnt from each other because it is in the detail of the moment that good leading happens... and also learning not to be fooled by the appearance of completeness and perfection in the behaviours of others.

*'As the cohort developed into a learning community, so their discussions became more real and they were less drawn to intellectual abstractions and the human side of leadership emerged'*

vi) The establishment of a robust learning community

*'What surprised me the most... the genuine, spontaneous candour... participants came in with wide-open minds... they challenged each other and challenged each other directly; they didn't go through the facilitator... very mature group behaviour'*

People were able to name and talk about the reality of their organisational situation – I am only going to allude to some of the conversations that this safe, candid space made possible because to write them down in black and white would be to break the basic agreement that what got talked about in the room, stayed in the room.

The conversations touched on how taken for granted gender expectations played out in the lab... and how accepted custom and practice influences how people are appointed into role. They also allowed people to see their own unconscious patterns played out, how they did or did not spontaneously line up on the side of colleagues – when the needs of the work might actually benefit from these colleagues being confronted or challenged about their behaviours and priorities.

vii) Access to first hand experience that can be applied to their own lives

I'd like to highlight this with an experience observed at one of the workshops, where a number of outside guests had been invited to join the group.

*'At one workshop three guests were invited to have dinner with the participants. [x] found herself at an all woman table, where two of the participants were pregnant... and they were curious about how the guest had been able to manage their professional life with the demands of being a mother. The dinner provided them with the opportunity to ask someone about their real experience... it was much more than networking, they were engaging with the guest with real curiosity and interest... with a sense that they could really learn from this person*

*How did the guest juggle having kids and growing their professional standing? How were they able to have a kid and be a leader? How did they juggle their husband's expectations with the responsibility of having two PhDs? Practical solutions were*

*shared... like bringing their kid and the person who helped looked after the kid to big MCDC conferences*

*During the half an hour they had together, they were hungry to know how the guest had made things work for them... the curiosity and desire to learn was very different to the more instrumental networking that can so often happen when a VIP drops into a dinner during a leadership development programme'*

#### viii) Access to systemic insights

*'They came in as one of the more senior people, believing they had little to learn... within a few hours they had new insights from the perspective of the younger, more junior participants'*

The programme created a group which brought together people from all sorts of levels within the MCDC research community in Africa – it also included three people who were not directly connected to MCDC but were close enough not to be strangers to the other nine. As a result of this mix of people learning was not stratified – many leadership development programmes bring together only those who are in a similar organisational position. By having people from a mix of positions, it allowed each of them to learn about how the world of leadership operates depending on different positional perspective (which is explored more conceptually in the work of Barry Oshry on systems leadership and his review of how life looks for the “tops”, “middles” and “bottoms” of organisational life).

In addition to this positional learning about leadership, participants had the experience of being with colleagues at different ages in their life and stages of their professional career – again adding to the breadth of experience and richness of learning about the realities of leadership, in a world made up of people who are all at different points in their lives.

#### ix) Exposure and experience of a new form of learning and development

*'Participants were introduced to a new form of learning... beyond the transfer of expert skills between tutor and student'*

Some people were explicitly doubtful about the value of a programme that relied so heavily on people working with their own experience and the experiences of others. From the start of the first workshop time and attention went towards supporting people in their personal reflection... there was never any possibility of a content led approach coming to the rescue of workshops. Participants had to provide the content to fill the time.

The evidence that this approach was valued comes from the commitment people showed to every step of the programme, to their attendance at the workshops and to their 100% engagement during the sessions themselves (people were hardly ever distracted by phones). People took the journaling seriously and it proved hard at the last workshop in London to get people to step away from the serious work of the workshop and just connect socially with each other and the visiting MCDC sponsors.

#### x) Friendship and warm connection

*'As a facilitator I felt a deep human connection to participants... they were friends coming to stay'*

Serious work was done over the life of the programme... personal vulnerabilities and confidences shared and worked with... and yet one observer described the mood of the group, certainly by the second workshop, of having the qualities of a summer camp. This was a closely bonded group of people.



And as part of the evidence of the closeness of social ties, there is the wider MCDC community of which the LDPers were a sub-section. This wider community includes a website dedicated to all the children that have been born since the consortium started in 2002.

#### xi) Introduction to new skills and knowledge

Much as the programme was designed to facilitate learning from within the existing knowledge and experience of participants, Workshop 2 included a series of “masterclasses” which explicitly focused on knowledge and skill building. The intention was to support participants in extending their repertoire of skills that would be useful to them as they lead themselves and others. Although the facilitators remain uncomfortable with the use of the label “masterclass”, assuming as it does that there is some definitive external knowledge to be learnt from – rather than a distinctive, expert perspective which skilled practitioners will be able to draw on and integrate within their existing capability.

The specific skills areas included listening, collaboration, conflict resolution, communication and communication tools, personal and project financing.

## The qualities of the learning experience

### *i) Demand led*

There was a hunger for this programme. Sponsors within MCDC knew from personal experience about the relative lack of development they had received in terms of organisational leadership beyond the strict boundaries of medical research. Analysis of the Personal Development Plans from previous Doctoral groups also revealed that this was something people would value

### *ii) The form of learning*

It is impossible to apply one single model of organisational and contextual reality to all the people completing their Doctorates under the MCDC umbrella. Some parts of the African and research world have very well developed institutional infrastructures, with well-defined career paths and leadership hierarchies - others are much more emergent.

### *iii) The qualities of the group*

This was a group made up of professional researchers... they were used to sharing scientific knowledge and so sharing other aspects of their work and lives was an adjacent space for them to move into (to borrow from the work of Stuart Kauffman, 'At Home in the Universe'... he advocates that sustainable change happens by moving into an adjacent space, not some great leap into the unknown. As a group of researchers, this was a familiar enough learning process to them).

The sponsors were certainly flabbergasted, in a good way, by the speed with which people embraced the invitation to share and learn together. Participants quickly embraced and worked with the understanding that this was a programme that expected (even demanded!) that they "be themselves"...and in doing so relax into really inquiring into their learning, rather than playing a role that fitted with expectations that the facilitators or the sponsors might have.

### *iv) The qualities of the facilitators*

The facilitators modelled what was expected from the group... being vulnerable, being supportive in the moment and sharing their experience from elsewhere. It mattered that the LDP was headed up by Anthony Kasozi, an African who had grown up in one of the continent's great malarial hotspots, who understood the institutional context of Africa and what it takes to make Northern expertise relevant to the African context.

They showed great integrity and had an impassioned commitment to the process of the programme and to its delivery philosophy. They also understood the financial constraints of MCDC and came up with a design that would work within those constraints, but remain true to the underlying approach.

*v) The social and physical 'architecture' of the workshops*

The workshops were explicitly held in venues that were not academic and were set up in ways that deliberately avoided feeling like traditional teaching settings. By weaving together conversations and priorities e.g. through coaching, what went on within the workshops was meaningfully connected to what was going on outside of the workshop.



The venues were also chosen to ensure that they were conducive settings for people to come together in small and large group conversations, to walk and talk and to sit comfortably together.

**The context within which the LDP was envisaged, launched and delivered**

*i) The longer and wider MCDC journey*

The LDP did not achieve what it achieved without building on what had gone before. As the philanthropic investor Doug Balfour noted in his book *Doing Good Great*:  
“Without the best context, good content can only achieve so much, and its doomed to

a repetitive cycle” (P 43). All the work that MCDC has been involved in since 2008, and prior to this, the work undertaken by the Gates Malaria Partnership, has laid the groundwork which allowed the LDP to make a difference – with the establishment of Personal Development Planning and Mentoring, so people got into the habit of thinking more explicitly about their careers. With the provision of some technical management planning courses, so it provided people with useful day-to-day tools. With its shifting focus away from training individual African PhDs detached from their home context, to one that looks to provide development to people embedded within their local context, so the need to look beyond the boundaries of purely medical research became a priority.

The demand for LDP emerged as the logical next step in the evolution of MCDC and not as some ‘good idea’ or imposed model of best practice. LDP worked for participants because it was relevant and needed because of the stage MCDC had reached in its evolution.

Above all participants stepped into the programme with a high regard for colleagues and staff of the MCDC.

### *ii) The contextual reality*

While the demand for leadership development was a common request and came from across many different African countries and institutions, the context within which these researchers had to exercise leadership was very different. At the same time participants occupied a diverse range of situations of varying seniority and were also at different stages of their professional career. There was also the variety that comes from participants being very different personalities and being influenced by very different sets of social expectations e.g. in association with gender.

Given this highly diverse contextual reality, any attempt to rollout a standardised model of leadership would have been doomed to failure, irrelevance or inapplicability at the point of use. The only form of leadership development that could possibly have succeeded was one where the responsibility for learning and action was firmly anchored within individuals, who owned the responsibility for translating insights into

locally relevant action (aided and abetted by a coach who could support them in this task).

### *iii) The enrolment of participants*

Enrolment had two elements that helped contribute to participants having a valuable experience. Firstly people had to demonstrate a personal hunger and commitment – this was successfully achieved in the eyes third parties, who were struck by the level of active engagement shown by participants (from carrying out written work, preparing for sessions and participating in workshops and coaching sessions – without being distracted by phones).

Secondly people had to have an institutional sponsor – prior experience with an earlier group had shown that some host organisations, who did not share the ambitions of individuals who had solely self-nominated, might side-line an individual on their return from study – rather than welcome them back in as a high achieving researcher (even if they had funds that would come with them when they were re-engaged).

## **3.3 The reviewers' sense making of the sponsor and deliverer perspective**

### **a) The critical success factors**

- *A fertile context* – so much groundwork had been done over the previous years to establish a context in which leadership development could be well received and valued. The shift in focus away from solely focusing on developing individual researcher to equipping researchers to amplify their effect through taking on major institutional roles is of great significance – as is embedding the habits and disciplines of personal development planning (and the self reflection that invites)
- *A willing and appreciative group* – this group of people were willing to try something different, to step into a different way of learning and developing, this may be because of their characters as people, their professional discipline as researchers (with a natural orientation that is drawn to experimental learning) and/or their hunger to address issues that mattered to them in their organisational

lives. When a group is minded to make an experience meaningful, it very rarely fails

- *Compelling and committed facilitators* – this work obviously mattered to Quilibra. Participants valued their expertise and found Anthony in particular, as a fellow African soaked in an understanding of their institutional and cultural complexity, a compelling presence (as did the sponsors of the work). The Quilibra team mirrored the commitment and integrity of the participants – they also mirrored the diversity of the participants and were able to model how to work with and complement each others differences. They also had a close bond of friendship as a group of professional leadership developers
- *A design that was fit for purpose* – given the diversity of contexts and personal realities, no theory or standard model approach would have had any chance of working – and would certainly not have reinforced a sense of an embedded African community of learning. The design, with its focus on digesting what was already known and sharing insights, helped create that rarest of things, a real culture of practical collective learning.
- *Flexibility and willingness to adapt* – while staying true to the principles and intention of the original design, the programme flexed to accommodate the reality of participants whose work kept presenting new challenges and themes, with the schedule and timetable that fitting to the reality of people’s lives, rather than trying to impose an artificial schedule that served the needs of the LDP itself

## **b) Connection to emerging and established insights into organisational practice**

The work that MCDC have been carrying out with the LDP resonates strongly with a recent Doctoral publication by Dr Megan Reitz: ‘Dialogue in organisations – developing relational leadership’. I used the following quote from it when facilitating its launch and it speaks of the qualities of the LDP as described to me over the last few weeks:

*‘... my [book]... it’s a passionate plea for organizations to inquire into how people meet – or not... how amazingly fragile we are as individuals in terms of our need to be confirmed by others... so when you talk about what hinders dialogue... It’s... the*

*fantasy that we operate as individual beings as opposed to being very, very common and the same... for me, being human is knowing what it is to be in relation to others and nature... I just don't see us getting closer in our organisational settings to encountering and appreciating and marvelling in each other... I see so many things that are leading away from the spaces where we [can meet each other in dialogue]' (Pages 239/40)*

The LDP and the longer term MCDC have been a positive response to Megan's despair. On the LDP people have been encountering, appreciating and marvelling in each other.

## References

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