Leadership in the New Zealand Probation Service: The perceptions and experiences of probation officers and service managers

Michael Dale and Andrew Trlin

Michael Dale, previously an Area Manager for the New Zealand Probation Service, is currently a Site Manager with the Child, Youth and Family Service in Palmerston North.

Andrew Trlin is an Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Health and Social Services at Massey University, Palmerston North.

Abstract

This article draws upon information collected from Probation Officers and Service Managers for a study on probation practice and the contribution of leadership to the achievement of effective service delivery in the New Zealand Probation Service. Findings are presented in relation to: (a) perceptions of leadership; and (b) experience of leadership. The participants' asserted that effective leadership rests upon the quality of the relationship that exists between leader and follower. In particular, positive experiences of leadership reflected an emphasis upon reciprocity and trust; and the Probation Officers provided a consistent message that effective leadership has a focus on practice and the provision of professional support. This was considered important in relation to Service Managers whose performance emerged as a factor that can directly affect the Probation Officer's ability to practise effectively with clients. Perceptions regarding senior managers were less positive; a sense emerged that they lacked the practice credibility that comes with professional knowledge and experience and relied on their legitimate, positional power rather than on expert or personal power. The article concludes with the identification and implications for the Probation Service of three key themes that emerge from the results presented, namely: (a) the leader/follower relationship; (b) leadership from senior mangers and Service Managers; and (c) the significance of professional credibility.

Introduction

In common with other domains of public sector social service provision the Probation Service practice context has been subject to a number of major changes since 1990. There has been a separation of policy development from service delivery with the consequent imposition of initiatives by senior managers with limited effective consultation in the field. The adoption of monetarist management practices and decreasing financial resources have seriously challenged fundamental assumptions regarding the purpose of practice; in particular, the demand for more with less has seen a shift to minimum practice standards with a greater emphasis upon client monitoring and containment rather than the achievement of rehabilitative goals.

The ability of the Probation Service to determine the construction of practice has also been affected by the politicisation of the practice context; notably, by changes in management philosophy and organisational structure. Furthermore, the tenets of New Public Management have challenged the level of professional autonomy previously exercised by practitioners, and tension has arisen between the values and beliefs associated with management and those espoused by practitioners aligned with the social work profession.

The impact of such changes upon staff, the quality and the effectiveness of service delivery have been reflected in part by the departure of staff experiencing a sense of dislocation and often negative media attention. However, the structural and policy shifts alone do not seem to offer sufficient explanation for the service and staffing difficulties that have emerged, nor for the tensions and disjunctions that have developed between front-line practitioners and those in supervisory and/or management positions. The nub of the problem appears to be one of leadership; that is, the provision of leadership that supports and facilitates the type of practice that is attractive to professional staff and that will result in more effective service delivery.

The core characteristics of professionals (ie, their expertise, operational autonomy and accountability) – be they in the Probation Service, District Health Boards or tertiary educational institutions – are such that most of them require little direct supervision from managers. It is the culture of the profession itself, channelled and enhanced rather than created by leadership from managers (Mintzberg, 1998: 145) that will to a considerable degree enable organisational service delivery goals to be met. There is, therefore, a need, as Shapero (1985: 23) observes, for management to be aware of the difference between managing professionals and assembly line workers if the professional's performance potential is to be optimised.

At issue here then is the contemporary conception of leadership in the New Zealand Probation Service – in particular, the role(s) and responsibilities of managers, and hence the knowledge, skills and experience they require for effective probation practice and administration in the context of New Public Management. Accordingly this paper considers the topic of leadership from the viewpoint of both Probation Officers (as front-line service providers) and Service Managers (who are responsible for teams of Probation Officers). Following an outline of the research methods employed for this study, the nature and importance of leadership is established via a brief literature review. Attention is then focused on the participants' perceptions and experiences of leadership in the Probation Service. The paper concludes with a discussion of key findings and their implications.

Method

The information presented here was collected as part of a doctoral study on probation practice and the contribution of leadership to the achievement of effective service delivery in the New Zealand Probation Service during a period of major change (Dale, 2006). A previous paper drawn from the same study examined the perception and construction of probation practice as social work (Dale and Trlin, 2007).

The research participants comprised a purposeful sample of 27 Probation Officers and eight Service Managers involved in front-line service delivery. They were recruited (with

the approval of the General Manager), from among those employed in the Northern and Southern administrative regions of the New Zealand Community Probation Service. Qualitative data were collected in March and September 2001 via personal in-depth interviews and augmented by focus group discussions.

The basic characteristics of the two groups of participants were more or less as expected. While the Probation Officers were spread over all of the specified age groups (20-50+) with half under age 40, the Service Managers were slightly older with none under 30 years of age. Overall, 58% of the participants were female and 42% male. However, it should be noted that whereas the majority of the Probation Officers were female (62%), the majority of the Service Managers were male (57%). Only two (7.7%) of the Probation Officers and none of the Service Managers identified themselves as Maori – a significant feature given the ethnic composition of the client population (48% Maori). Although a high proportion (70%) held a tertiary education qualification, just 26% of the participants held a social work degree or diploma. Finally, 50% of the Probation Officers had less than six years' experience in the Probation Service, and 38.5% had 11+ years. In comparison, only one Service Manager had less than six years' experience with the others almost equally divided between 6-10 and 11+ years experience.

What is leadership and why is it important?

An initial understanding of leadership is developed here by consideration of: (a) the definition of leadership; (b) characteristics associated with leadership; and (c) the relationship between leadership, organisational vision and values.

Definition of leadership

Definitions of leadership provided by researchers working in a correctional context (eg, Cohn, 1998; Powls, 1990; Wright, 1991) share the core characteristics of definitions within the generic management literature (see Bartol, Martin, Tein & Matthews, 1995; Fiedler, 1996; Northouse, 1997; Parry, 1999; Yukl, 1998). For example, Yukl (1998: 5) defined leadership as the process:

> …wherein an individual member of a group or organisation influences the interpretation of events, the choice of objectives and strategies, the organisation of work activities, the motivation of people to achieve objectives, the maintenance of cooperative relationships, the development of skills and confidence by members, and the enlistment of support and cooperation from people outside the group or organisation.

The importance of influence exercised upon others to work toward particular goals or objectives was also emphasised by Wright (1991), Bartol, et al. (1995: 13-14) and especially by Northouse (1997: 3) who perceived influence to be 'the sine qua non of leadership. Without influence, leadership does not exist'.

A second major theme with regard to leadership concerns a distinction that can be drawn between leaders and followers. Parry (1999: 17), for example, defines leadership as the:

> …presentation by a leader of some identifiable goal or vision or future state that people can desire; and the generation of a willingness within those people to follow the leader along a socially responsible and mutually beneficial course of action, toward that goal.

Parry amplified the nature of the leader/follower relationship via discussion of the concept of 'willing following', a characteristic that enables a distinction to be made between genuine leadership and the 'mere exercise of power to exert influence over others' (Parry, 1999: 17). In order for followers to be sufficiently motivated to act, however, the 'goal or vision or future state' set by the leader must be considered to be achievable and the outcome of the action should be of mutual benefit to both leader and follower.

The importance of follower engagement and commitment in the leader/follower relationship was noted by Powls (1990: 32) and Wright (1991: 5). Powls suggested that followers are more likely to accept leadership from management if they have a clear understanding of what to expect, while Wright has noted that followers are more likely to be committed if they are actively involved in setting objectives or goals. It is therefore the leader who has the primary responsibility for initiating and maintaining the relationship (Northouse, 1997: 4).

To sum up, the concept of leadership rests upon the relationship between leader and follower. This relationship involves a dynamic process between the leader (using influence and persuasion) and follower in pursuit of a set of goals and objectives. The willingness of the follower to be led is linked to the level of follower motivation, commitment and involvement.

Leadership characteristics
What personal qualities and behaviours differentiate effective leaders? Answers to this question may be gained from a consideration of trait, behavioural and situational leadership theories.

Northouse (1997) completed a review of significant studies and concluded that five traits are central to the literature – namely intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity and sociability. However, Northouse cautioned that the list was not all-inclusive, a significant point given that a key assumption underlying trait theory is that traits identified in recognised leaders may provide the foundation for the development of leadership capacities in others (see Bryans and Walford, 1998: 11; Fairholm, 1998: 50-51).

Similarly the behavioural perspective assumes that certain behaviours may be associated with successful leadership, and that such behaviours (if identified) can be learned by individuals in order to enhance their leadership effectiveness. Northouse (1997) identified two general kinds of behaviour associated with leadership: task behaviours that focus on goal achievement (eg, role definition and organisation to ensure followers know what, where and how tasks are to be accomplished); and relationship behaviours, that focus upon assisting followers to adjust to peers and the work environment (eg, maintaining personal relations by opening channels of communication, providing socio-emotional support, active listening and facilitating behaviours).

Finally, situational leadership theory directs attention to both: (a) the impact of change in individuals and the environment upon leadership; and (b) the interrelationship between leader behaviours, follower behaviours and the impact of situational factors which include personal characteristics, environmental influences and organisational strategies (Bryans & Walford, 1998; Hersey & Blanchard, 1996). A critical assumption of this approach is the need for flexible and adaptive leadership; different situations require different types of leadership,

and the needs of followers are liable to change (Fairholm, 1998:53; Starbuck and Gamble, 1990:84; Yukl, 1998:10). To be effective, therefore, leaders should exercise a degree of flexibility in their behaviour, taking into account both their own and their subordinates' individual characteristics and situational factors when selecting a leadership approach.

Leadership, organisational vision and values
Cohn (1998) suggests that the future vision of an organisation rests upon two key components: first, a core ideology which is composed of a set of core values (with associated principles and tenets); and second, a core purpose which is the organisation's fundamental reason for continuing its business. If we proceed with the suggestion that organisational vision is based in part upon a set of core values, then what is the role of leadership in developing and promoting both vision and values?

A clear consensus emerges from commentators that in order to be effective, leaders must recognise and actively promote the connection between vision and values. The enunciation of a clear future vision will both provide direction for organisational development and serve as a focus for staff (Vernon and Byrd, 1996: 22). A values-based leadership perspective seeks to link leader and follower through the articulation of a set of common values (Fairholm, 1998: 56; Pawar and Eastman, 1997) which: (a) serve as standards to guide actions and define what is acceptable; and (b) act as latent influences on the behaviour of the individual.

In summary, the willingness of followers to accept leadership direction is likely to be related to the degree of follower motivation and understanding, and to the level of value congruence between leader and follower. The creation of 'willing following' is related to the promotion of achievable goals, notably goals of mutual benefit to leader and follower. That said, it must be remembered that a values-based leadership approach seeks to link leader and follower through the articulation of a set of common values, and the degree of values congruence between leaders and followers is likely to exert a significant influence upon goal achievement.

The participants' perceptions of leadership

The Probation Officers and Service Managers framed their responses regarding leadership knowledge and experience within the context of their experiences in the Probation Service. For ease of presentation and comprehension the analysis of this information is presented here in relation to (a) the construction of leadership, and (b) characteristics associated with effective leadership.

Construction of leadership
The participants' understanding of leadership was constructed in terms of three themes, namely: leadership involves the leader providing direction and vision; leadership involves influence and is important in achieving change; and leadership involves a group or a team.

With regard to the first theme, 55% of the Probation Officers agreed that managers had a leadership responsibility to provide direction and vision to staff. As illustrated in the following quotation, it was felt that leaders must themselves be clear about what they are leading others towards and how goals will be achieved:

> One of the most important things about leadership is having a vision and knowing where you want to go. Being really clear about the goal. Working with people to get them to achieve your goal.

The majority of the Service Managers (62.5%) displayed a similar concern. For example:

> Leadership is more to do with establishing directions, developing vision…about aligning people to the direction of the organisation. Leaders motivate and inspire people.

Development of a clear vision was considered to be essential if a leader is to be able to lead change, and must enable staff to develop a common sense of where the team is going.

The second theme, noted by 52% of the Probation Officers and all of the Service Managers, concerned the relationship between leadership, influence and change. For the Probation Officers an effective leader was one who took the initiative, had an ideal (regarding the purpose of probation) and was able to inspire or influence staff to act in order to achieve the goals of the organisation. The following quotation illustrates this perception:

> There's a certain 'X' factor that goes with being a leader and I suppose in some ways that's oriented around an ability to inspire those they're working with.

Service Managers for their part observed that effective leaders create opportunities for staff to be innovative, do not seek to control staff but work with and influence them to achieve change:

> It's a very people-oriented thing, it involves a great deal of enthusiasm, energy, modelling. It's about influencing others to draw them along.

> Leadership is about taking risks, letting go of control, trusting, creating opportunities and allowing innovation.

The third theme concerned the enactment of leadership within a group or team. Among the Probation Officers this theme came through in comments such as the following:

> I see good leadership as an enabling role; it's using the skills and abilities of people to achieve goals. A good leader needs to consult or work with people in order to achieve the result.

> Leadership implies drawing a team together, drawing on the strength of the team…allowing the team to make the decision.

In other words, an effective leader is one who demonstrates an understanding of individuals in the team, is able to work with and to bring out the best in staff, and is able to create a sense of bonding that draws the team together.

Two Service Managers similarly developed the theme of leadership within a team that entailed participation in decision-making, the role of the group in establishing a common sense of direction, and an understanding of individuals and their actions etc:

> Leadership is where you get people on board in more of the group setting so that you are the leader of the group and so that a lot of the decisions are made in the group through discussion and open communication.

> Leadership is around looking at the different leaders in the team, at what they are leading towards, what are they pulling the team towards and how ...that fit[s] with the organisational goal of reducing re-offending.

In summary, it is clear that the views expressed by the participating Probation Officers and Service Managers were consistent with definitions of leadership within the generic management literature (eg, Fiedler, 1996; Northouse, 1997; Parry, 1999; Yukl, 1998). In particular, leadership was understood to be an activity based upon the use of influence upon others, to entail a distinction between leaders and followers, and the participants' views also support the point made by Parry (1999) regarding the development of 'willing following'. Furthermore, the emphasis placed on vision, influence, direction and shared purpose indicate the sensitivity of the participants to the construction of transformational (ie, change oriented) leadership as articulated by writers such as Bass (1990), Burns (1978), Northouse (1997) and Yukl (1998).

Leadership characteristics

When asked to identify traits and behaviours associated with effective leadership, the Probation Officers and Service Managers were in accord regarding the core characteristics concerned. Embracing characteristics such as selfconfidence, integrity, leading by example and sociability, the traits and behaviours identified by the participants unequivocally support the earlier findings of leading researchers (eg, Stogdill, 1948; Northouse, 1997; Yukl, 1998).

As illustrated in the following quotation, one-third of the Probation Officers noted that an ability to lead was associated with selfconfidence:

> The people who are good leaders are confident in themselves. They are able to listen to people's ideas and at the same time don't feel as if their power and authority has been undermined...

Self-confidence, however, appeared to be less significant in the thinking of participants than the quality of personal integrity. Identified by 37% of the Probation Officers, personal integrity could be seen (as one participant noted) to involve the capacity to 'be able to challenge things, not to toe the party line, to think outside the square'. Furthermore, it was a quality that could be linked with ethics and values as illustrated by a Probation Officer who said:

> I'm looking for someone who has integrity, sound ethics. It's no good doing all the leadership things if in actual fact you've got shonky ethics and values.

The possession of integrity was also identified as an important leadership characteristic by 75% of the Service Managers, one of whom declared:

> I think that the fundamental issue for a leader is do they keep their word? Are they committed to what they say they will do? So they're people who have integrity in their actions and their words.

There was also strong evidence that both groups of participants valued certain relationship behaviours in leaders. Among the Probation Officers, effective leaders were described as having the ability to engage with staff, gain trust and lead by example. As one Probation Officer put it: 'the follower will only accept the leader if there is trust', which comes if the leader

knows what he or she is talking about and provides a good role model. The expectation that a leader will lead by example was also expressed by two Service Managers as follows:

> I would follow a leader who demonstrates personal integrity, a personal skill.

> People will follow a leader who both knows the practice and can generate feelings based on integrity of character and knowledge of what they are doing.

Other relationship behaviours valued by the participants were those which reflected consideration for staff/followers along the lines noted by Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson (1996). Probation Officers, for example, valued support from Service Managers, and considered it important that they take an active interest in staff, provide encouragement and be sensitive to, and take action to relieve, excessive workload and stress.

Finally, for the Probation Officers, sociability emerged as a further characteristic. An effective leader was described as having 'a human touch, warm and engaging', with the 'ability to get people on board' and to 'build rapport quickly'. Other aspects of sociability included having a sense of humour, a degree of humility and sensitivity to the position and experience of the Probation Officer (ie, 'knowing what it is like down through the levels').

The participants' experiences of leadership

The participants' experience of leadership is examined via discussion regarding: (a) whom the participants' identified as leaders; and (b) their experiences of leadership from managers.

Identified leaders in the Probation Service

The participants identified Service Managers and other Probation Officers as the two groups of staff that provide leadership in the field. Fifty-five percent of the Probation Officers made reference to Service Managers as leaders, while 70% considered other Probation Officers to be leaders. In comparison, only 25% of the Service Managers referred to other Service Managers as leaders, and 37.5% considered Probation Officers to be leaders. This practice leadership differed from organisationally focused leadership that the participants thought should be provided by senior managers.

Probation Officers from the basic grade were identified as a potential source of practice leadership, and peer recognition was identified as a basis for such leadership:

> I think natural leaders will be sorted out by peers and you would find that natural leaders have their peers coming to them for advice, guidance and comment.

Professional competence was also identified as a foundation for this leadership. For example, one Probation Officer commented: '[t]here are very skilled and experienced basic grade Probation Officers working in specialist areas who are able to have that leadership role'. Further characteristics associated with leadership from Probation Officers were: a willingness to offer advice and assistance; a demonstrated ability 'to think outside the square and come up with initiatives for more effective practice'; and an ability to provide professional supervision to their colleagues. With regard to the latter characteristic, one participant said: 'I see a new breed of leaders coming through as being the professional supervisors. They tend to be the motivators'.

Finally, aside from the perceived influence of some external consultants, a Probation Officer and a Service Manager identified the Psychological Service as providing practice leadership. For the Probation Officer this influence was of concern:

> It is the Psychological Service that has got the academic high ground. We are following the Psychological Service instead of having our own professional identity and direction as the Probation Service.

The Service Manager, on the other hand, observed that:

> A lot of the changes in anger management and assessment are coming out of the Psychological Service. So, if you're talking about who are the leaders, the people who are actually changing the way we work, which I think is a leadership issue, those would be the people I would identify.

Experience of leadership from senior managers

The Probation Officers' recent experience of leadership from senior managers (whose 'style' was perceived to be characterised by directive and controlling behaviours) was predominantly negative. While there were some exceptions, the following quotations illustrate the general tenor of the views expressed:

> We have not had a lot of leadership, particularly in the last two years, and that's where I think a lot of cynicism comes from.

> Under the current regime things are imposed and staff feel unsupported. It is because of this constant fear [held by senior managers] that staff are going to muck up that staff have more and more checks to complete which stops them from actually doing the job.

For another Probation Officer, the senior managers had failed to provide clear direction:

> There is no real strategic direction from senior management, direction is really influenced by consultants and ideas come from outside the department.

The harshest critique, however, concerned a lack of honesty:

> On occasions some [senior managers] are just out and out liars and that immediately poses a problem. I find that the person tends to lose a lot of credibility.

Seven of the eight Service Managers made observations regarding their superiors, and in doing so identified four main points of tension regarding the leadership relationship that exists between staff in the field and senior management and Head Office staff. First, comments were made regarding senior managers that reflected disappointment, discontent and a lessening of confidence. As one participant put it:

> A lot of people were swept up in the restructuring and saw the GM [General Manager] as strong, clever and capable, but over time have become disillusioned and disappointed.

Another referred to the 'dissonance and incongruity between what's being said and what's actually happening'. Second, a disjunction was noted between the positive messages contained in official publications and the less positive or negative reality perceived by

some staff, a disjunction that was also perceived to betray a lack of honesty. Third, concern was expressed regarding the behaviour of some senior managers. For example, a Service Manager visiting Head Office had overheard HO staff discussing other Probation Service staff in a manner considered to be disrespectful. Finally, it was felt that some measures were implemented and instructions issued without consultation and/or consideration of the practice perspective regarding feasibility. This point was illustrated with reference to an increased emphasis upon the management of risk and control in clinical decision making that was seen to be in conflict with professional autonomy when practitioners adjusting to the implementation of new policy and practice requirements are likely to need a greater degree of flexibility and discretion. There was also an increasing emphasis upon reputational risk; in other words, 'What's going to be on the front page of the [*New Zealand*] *Herald*?'

In contrast to their sentiments about senior managers, the Service Managers related a more positive experience of leadership with regard to Area Managers and were sensitive to the pressures that these managers experienced. For example, in describing the impact of the management style adopted by senior managers, a Service Manager said: 'My [Area] Manager was beaten around too much to want to lead any more, [or to] manage anymore'.

Experience of leadership from Service Managers
Almost three quarters of the participating Probation Officers commented on their experience of leadership by Service Managers. While there was variation in their responses, four substantive themes were identified: (a) the emphasis placed upon results and compliance in comparison with staff and practice; (b) concern regarding a lack of professional leadership; (c) the relationship between effective leadership and staff performance; and (d) the impact of stress upon Service Managers.

With regard to the emphasis placed upon administrative compliance as opposed to practice, the Service Manager role was described as having been reduced to administration rather than the provision of practice leadership. For example, one participant declared that:

> There is very rigorous checking of the person's address, phone number, home visits, records in the computer – have these things been done? Not how well have these things been done, [there is] little emphasis on actual casework.

However, although it was appreciated that Service Managers may be caught between the competing demands of senior managers and Probation Officers, this did not mitigate the sense that the results focus has been maintained at the expense of valuing the field worker.

> What I find with Service Managers [is that] the role in itself [is] huge and it's bogged down by administrative detail; a lot of paper pushing and box ticking. It's almost like crisis management or reactive management rather than pro-active management. I don't classify that as leadership, I don't have any respect for it. ...I think there's a loss of human value in that and a loss of respect for the workers.

In relation to the second theme, one third of the Probation Officers indicated that professional leadership was not well defined or co-ordinated in the Probation Service. This perception was shared by half of the Service Managers, one of whom observed:

> I think it's sadly lacking... Service Managers are really the only people involved and we are employing more people who don't have the practice experience – that could quickly erode our professionalism.

Given the appointment of people without practice knowledge and experience (a prerequisite of professional leadership), it was not surprising that another Service Manager was sensitive to Probation Officer perceptions of his role and performance that could impede his ability to actively promote sound and effective practice:

> When you move into a Service Manager role it's a departmental position. Things that you may present and believe are professional issues are interpreted as organisational issues.

Significantly, five of the eight Service Managers noted that Probation Officers themselves might exert professional leadership at a team or service centre level depending on the individual's professional expertise, experience and credibility amongst their peers.

The latter point is significant. Although the participating Probation Officers did not identify a particular organisational role in the Probation Service that entailed responsibility for the provision of professional leadership, two-thirds of them (as illustrated in the following quote) identified experienced colleagues who demonstrated via their behaviour, relationships and practice an active interest in matters related to such leadership:

> At the moment I think it comes from the Probation Officer level, from experienced staff that have got a particular interest in maintaining professional standards. I think that's where the energy for it comes from.

Such views were consistent with what one Probation Officer identified as a 'long tradition' in the service of practitioners leading and developing models of practice.

Do Service Managers have a professional leadership role to play? According to 44% of the Probation Officers they do. It was noted that many (but not all) have the requisite practice knowledge and experience. However, 'competing work demands' were thought to detract from their ability to fulfil this role.

Turning now to the third theme, the relationship between effective leadership and staff performance, one Probation Officer made a direct link between the performance of Service Managers and the leadership provided to them:

> I think that the Service Managers are barely coping with the way the system is at the moment. Their direction comes from their Area Manager and from the Regional Manager, and having experienced our Regional Manager frequently I also question his ability to project leadership.

Of course, not all of the experiences reported by Probation Officers were critical or negative. Positive comments were made by 36% of the Probation Officers and these focused on the personal support received. One Service Manager, for example, was described as 'nurturing...showing appreciation and positive feedback'. In another case the Service Manager's leadership was identified as the primary reason for remaining in the job.

Finally, as illustrated in the two following quotes, one quarter of the Probation Officers were concerned about the effect upon themselves or other staff of the stress they observed

in their Service Managers:

> Two or three of the Service Managers …make it quite transparent to their team that they are feeling overwhelmed, that they are finding it really difficult. For me the Service Manager is totally unaware of how his team is feeling in terms of his talking about his own feelings.

> I don't need him telling me all the reasons why he's stressed out and why he can't help me.

Not surprising was the observation that some Service Managers were known to be searching for alternative employment, not always with success.

In light of the above, the question inevitably arises as to how the concerns, criticisms and negative comments made by the majority of the Probation Officers with respect to their experience of leadership from Service Managers may be explained. Possible answers can be gained from comments offered by Service Managers themselves. In essence, frustration and concern is evident with regard to the tension between management requirements on the one hand and professional issues or aspirations on the other:

> I'm a half-pie manager, but I'm not really a bloody manager, everything is so prescriptive. I feel less and less a leader, [as] my leadership is more around approximation and legitimation. …I'm expected to do enough management things to significantly distract me from where I'd like to be – primarily a team leader, educator, case work supervisor.

A lack of role clarity was also identified as well as insufficient training:

> Leadership styles depend upon the person. There is a lack of clear direction regarding the Service Manager role therefore Service Managers adopt a style that suits them.

> I don't..[think] I received sufficient training to be a manager. I found it very discouraging [as] decisions couldn't be made and stuck to.

Conclusion

This paper has focused upon an examination of the views and experience of leadership among Probation Officers and Service Managers. While leadership was not considered to be confined to a particular organisational role or position, an expectation of leadership was associated with certain structural positions. Both Probation Officers and Service Managers noted a lack of clear direction regarding professional leadership and its development in the Probation Service and this emerged as a challenge for both managers and field staff. Final comment is now warranted regarding three key themes and their implications for the Probation Service, namely: (a) the leader/follower relationship; (b) leadership from senior mangers and Service Managers; and (c) the significance of professional credibility.

With regard to the leader/follower relationship, three key points emerged. First, the participants held that effective leadership rests upon the relationship developed between the leader and a group or team and that the leader should seek to establish group cohesion. There was support for the argument advanced by Northouse (1997) that the leader should assume primary responsibility for initiating and maintaining a relationship with followers. Both groups of participants placed emphasis on personal power and there was evidence that

they valued relationship behaviours in leaders. Notwithstanding concerns expressed by the participants the positive experiences of leadership reflected an emphasis upon reciprocity, trust and a focus upon the quality of the relationship between follower and leader. Second, the Probation Officers emphasised the importance of receiving support from leaders in relation to their work with clients. Their accounts provided a consistent message that they were seeking leadership that focused upon practice and that provided professional support. Third, the performance of the Service Manager emerged as a factor that can directly influence the Probation Officers' commitment to their work and their ability to practice. In particular, a positive association was drawn between the Service Manager's professional experience, their possession of personal power and their ability to influence Probation Officer practice. Overall, the above characteristics of the relationship between leader and follower are firmly located in a construction of probation practice as a professional enterprise based upon knowledge, experience and commitment to working with clients.

Although senior managers (ie, Head Office managers and Regional Managers) were identified as being responsible for organisational leadership, the participants observed that this type of leadership was not always evident. What emerged was a sense that senior managers rely upon their legitimate positional power rather than expert or personal power (Erchul and Raven, 1997). While this was accepted by the participants as being (at least technically) right and proper, it reflects a disjunction between the values and orientation of 'leaders' wedded to New Public Management with its emphasis upon cost, efficiency and results, and the values and orientation of professionals who place emphasis upon practice involving clients.

Of significance also was the association between a low level of follower confidence in senior managers and the view that their decisions lacked the practice credibility that comes with professional knowledge and experience. In particular, the participants were sensitive to decisions regarding practice development that were thought to diminish the professional standing of Probation Service practitioners. Clearly there was an expectation that senior managers should provide direction regarding practice, however their perceived reliance on external individuals and organisations (rather than in-house staff) for advice and practice development detracted from their leadership credibility.

The most significant issue raised by Probation Officers with regard to Service Manager leadership related to a lack of clarity regarding the Service Manager role. The impact of the New Public Management philosophy was apparent with Service Managers being seen to place greater emphasis upon business requirements (ie, tasks, results and organisational performance) at the expense of practice and professional leadership. A negative impact of this situation was that some Probation Officers did not feel valued in their role as front-line professional practitioners. In part, this was undoubtedly a consequence also of the appointment of Service Managers who lacked relevant experience and training in probation work. This contributed to both a loss of credibility and respect on the part of many Probation Officers as well as concern at the manner in which some Service Managers exercised their positional power. It was not surprising, therefore, that two-thirds of the Probation Officers (like the majority of the Service Managers) identified other Probation Officers who exhibited the desired qualities (practice experience, expertise, credibility, a client focus and the ability to develop practice in a reflexive manner) as the primary source of professional leadership.

Finally, as indicated above and as evidenced at various points in the results presented in this paper, professional credibility was an important element in the construction and experience of effective professional leadership. Based upon experience and expertise in the field of practice, and enhanced by a shared philosophy of practice, the leader with professional credibility was one who set a professional example and was able to articulate and demonstrate a concern with values, ethics, standards and long-term goals. A leader with this attribute was more likely to provide direction and support regarding practice with clients, to inspire trust and loyalty, to engender confidence in followers and to improve follower motivation and performance. The majority of both the Probation Officers and Service Managers appeared to recognise the foundations and significance of this leadership credibility for the promotion of professional practice and hence effective service delivery.

Taken at face value alone, the views and experiences of the participants provide a sense of direction for the Probation Service regarding the recruitment and professional development of those appointed to leadership positions. Priority should be given in personnel recruitment to the appointment of candidates with demonstrated competencies in probation practice, knowledge and skills as well as skills in (or at least an aptitude for) management if possible. If management skills and experience are lacking, particularly among Service Managers with practice competencies, then the resources should be marshalled to provide the appropriate professional development opportunities. Implicit in this ordering of priorities is the development and implementation of a model of leadership that is practice relevant and founded on a distinctive probation knowledge base which is likely to enhance the achievement of Probation Service objectives. Such a model is consistent with the views of Chor-fai Au (1994, 1996) who observed that the knowledge base of social welfare administration has been largely shaped by the practice context, and that many administrators now recognise the unique characteristics of human services in contrast to those of other organisations. Clearly there is a far-reaching challenge here that should be taken up by senior managers.

References

Bartol, K. M., Martin, D. C., Tein, M. & Matthews, G. (1995). *Management: A pacific rim focus*. Sydney: McGraw-Hill.

Bass, B. M. (1990). From transactional to transformational leadership: learning to share the vision. *Organizational Dynamics, 18*(3): 19-31.

Bryans, S., & Walford, J. (1998). Leadership in the Prison Service. *Prison Service Journal, 119*: 10-13.

Burns, J. M. (1978). *Leadership*. New York: Harper Collins.

Cohn, A. W. (1998). The failure of correctional management: rhetoric versus the reality of leadership. *Federal Probation, 62*(1): 26-31.

Chor-fai Au, (1994). The status of theory and knowledge development in social welfare administration. *Administration in Social Work, 18*(3): 27-57.

Chor-fai Au, (1996). Rethinking organisational effectiveness: theoretical and methodological issues in the study of organisational effectiveness for social welfare organisations. *Administration in Social Work, 20*(4): 1-21.

Dale, M. P. (2006). *Probation practice, leadership and effective service delivery: A qualitative study of the perspectives of probation officers and service managers in the New Zealand Probation Service*. PhD Thesis. Palmerston North: Massey University.

Dale, M. P., & Trlin, A. (2007). Probation practice as social work – viewpoints of practitioners in New Zealand. *Social Work Review, 19*(2): 4-11.

Erchul, W.P., & Raven, B. H. (1997). Social power in school consultation: a contemporary view of French and Raven's bases of power model. *Journal of School Psychology, 35*(2): 137-171.

Fairholm, G. W. (1998). *Perspectives on leadership: From science of management to its spiritual heart*. Westport: Quorum Books.

Fiedler, F. E. (1996). Research on leadership selection and training: one view of the future. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 42*(2): 241-250.

Hersey, P., & Blanchard, K. H. (1996). Great ideas revisited: revisiting the life-cycle theory of leadership. *Training and Development, 50*(1): 42-47.

Hersey, P., Blanchard K.H., & Johnson, D. (1996). *Management of organisational behaviour*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Mintzberg, H. (1998). Covert leadership: notes on managing professionals. *Harvard Business Review,* November-December: 140-147.

Northouse, P. (1997). *Leadership: Theory and practice*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Parry, K. (1999). Leadership challenges for the public sector: a preliminary assessment and conclusions for research. *Public Sector, 21*(4): 17-22.

Pawar, B., & Eastman, K. K. (1997). The nature and implications of contextual influences on transformational leadership: a conceptual examination. *Academy of Management Review, 22*(1): 80-109.

Powls, J. (1990). Leaders and followers – training managers and staff for participation and involvement. *Prison Service Journal, 80*: 31-33.

Shapero, A. (1985). Managing creative professionals. *Research Management, 28*(2): 23-28.

Starbuck, G., & Gamble, J. M. (1990). Wyoming management staff offer leadership tips for changing times. *Corrections Today,* December: 84-87

Stogdill, R. M. (1948). Personal factors associated with leadership: a survey of the literature. *The Journal of Psychology, 25*: 35-71.

Vernon, M. C., & Byrd, J. W. (1996). Leadership in the 21st century: new roles for federal probation and pretrial services chiefs. *Federal Probation, 60*: 21-29.

Wright, K. N. (1991). Prison leadership. *Federal Prisons Journal, 2*(3): 5-10.

Yukl, G. (1998). *Leadership in organisations* (4th ed.) Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.