Doctoral supervision as leadership: a practice-based proposal with special reference to the university hospital setting

Author: Emmanuel Bäckryd, M.D., Ph.D.

Affiliation: Pain and Rehabilitation Centre, and Department of Health, Medicine and Caring Sciences, Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden

E-mail: emmanuel.backryd@regionostergotland.se

Funding: None.

Conflict of interest statement: There is no conflict of interest.

ORCID: 0000-0003-4420-418X

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
ABSTRACT

Leadership issues seem to be strangely absent from discussions about what good doctoral supervision is. The purpose of this paper is to explore the concept of doctoral supervision as a form of leadership, with special reference to the university hospital setting. From a personal reflective practice point of view, James Kouzes and Barry Posner's *The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership® Model* is used as a lens through which Anne Lee's *concepts of doctoral research supervision* are viewed. Four out of five of Lee’s concepts seem to be leadership-related, when viewed from the perspective of Kouzes & Posner, namely “enculturation”, “critical thinking”, “emancipation”, and “relationship development”. The fifth concept, “functional”, can instead be viewed to reflect *managerial* skills. Hence, it seems meaningful to view doctoral supervision as a form of leadership. The present concept paper should be viewed as hypothesis-generating, and future studies should examine the proposed hypothesis in a more in-depth fashion, using appropriate empirical methodologies and not as in the present paper mere practice-based reflections.

KEYWORDS

doctoral; supervision; leadership; Kouzes; Posner; Lee
INTRODUCTION

The university hospital as a doctoral environment seems to present unique supervision challenges compared to other doctoral contexts [3], not least if the student and/or the supervisor are busy clinicians [25]. Moreover, conducting part-time doctoral studies is not an uncommon phenomenon for health professionals, at least in the Nordic countries [15]. Available studies seem to indicate that part-time doctoral students tend to have dissimilar experiences and situations from full-time students [10; 27]. For instance, an interview study revealed three themes that characterized part-time doctoral students [10]:

- Balance between different roles: having multiple roles can be stressful.
- Support: unlike full-time students, part-time students did not primarily turn to supervisors or doctoral colleagues for support, but to family members and/or to their place of employment (employer and/or co-workers).
- Fitting the mold: many students regretted not having closer relationships with their faculty and student colleagues, i.e., they felt that their situation was somewhat unorthodox.

Having completed a PhD alongside being a practising physician in a university hospital in Sweden, my own personal experience is congruent with what has been mentioned above. Although I did have an understanding boss and supportive colleagues, the constraints of clinical work and the fact that I had dual roles (specialist physician and PhD student) sometimes led to a feeling of inadequacy in both settings. This never amounted to pathological stress or any real crisis, but the tension was nevertheless there, i.e., something to be coped with.

In this conceptual paper, and as explained more in details in the Methods section, I will make use of my own experience, first as a PhD student and now (since 2019) as a PhD supervisor, to reflect on the phenomenon of supervisorship. My experience as Head Physician of a university hospital clinic (2016-2021) is also important here. In this paper, I am in the first stages of re-enacting in a new setting a process that has been ongoing during my more than 20 years of clinical work, namely the process of reflective practice [12]. Having previously reflected for years on how I can be a better physician, I have now turned my attention to the practice of PhD supervisorship.

At Linköping University, Sweden, the course Research Supervision – Course in Higher education at advanced level is compulsory for appointment to Professor, Reader and/or Associate Professor – and hence the course is mandatory before being allowed to take on the role of main supervisor for a PhD student. Part of the course is faculty-specific (e.g., faculty of medicine). The overall purpose of the course is to critically reflect on and develop an understanding of

- assessment of good supervision quality
- individual, organizational and other conditions of the supervision process
- the development of productive learning environments
- how different research cultures and research environments influences the processes of supervision
- preconceptions regarding supervision as practice held by the participants themselves
• construction of positions as main supervisor, co-supervisor and PhD student, and collaboration between these roles
• positions regarding ethics and 'Equal Opportunities' in the carrying out of the supervision task
• development of an individual set of supervision strategies [21].

When I first read this list of laudable course aims, I was struck by the lack of any clear reference to leadership and leadership theories. Of course, one could argue that leadership issues are there “between the lines” of the course syllabus. For instance, it might be contended that the “development of productive learning environments” really is about leadership, i.e., that such a work clearly denotes active pedagogical work that must encompass a leadership role. I am sympathetic so such a reading of the syllabus. My point here however is that an outright leadership perspective is lacking, and that doctoral supervision is viewed mainly through pedagogical and regulatory lenses. At the time, I was Head Physician of a university hospital clinic, and I was regularly reflecting on leadership issues. It therefore seemed natural to view the supervisorship role through the lens of leadership – and I was surprised that such a perspective was lacking in the course. I therefore began reflecting on the question: In what sense, if any, is supervisorship a form of leadership? As part of my leadership reflections, I had been reading James Kouzes & Barry Posner’s (K&P) book The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership® Model [16] – a model that will be described below. For the time being, suffice is to say that the K&P model was very much alive in my thoughts, and when during the course I read a paper by Anne Lee entitled How are doctoral students supervised? Concepts of doctoral research supervision [18], a comparison between K&P and Lee seemed to be a fruitful way forward in my reflections. Hence, the present conceptual paper scrutinizes Lee’s Concepts of doctoral research supervision from the perspective of leadership, as exemplified by K&Ps The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership® Model. The aim of the paper could be viewed as hypothesis-generating, i.e., it is a practice-based proposal that needs to be tested further in empirical studies performed by adequately trained researchers in the fields of higher education pedagogy and/or leadership.

METHODS

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Although there is no consensus about what the concept of reflective practice entails [7], simply put, reflective practice has in a medical setting been defined as “the process whereby an individual thinks analytically about anything relating to their professional practice with the intention of gaining insight and using the lessons learned to maintain good practice or make improvements where possible” [1]. In an even shorter definition, it has been said that reflective practice essentially “involves internal exploration and analysis of a problem or situation, assessing what has been learnt from the experience and how this will influence future experiences and practice” [5]. From my perspective, one important thing that is missing from these two short definitions is an emphasis on the importance of staying up-to-date concerning what the scientific litterature says about the topic or problem at hand – in my case, this involves using PubMed on a quasi-daily basis. In my clinical practice, personal experience and PubMed-based knowledge are intertwined in such an intricate way that it is not really possible to say where the one ends and the other starts, theoretical knowledge and
practical knowledge hence being deeply dependent on one another [12]. If experience and “personal knowledge” are divorced from science, the practitioner risks finding himself or herself in an empty echo chamber, “hearing” only his/her own idiosyncratic thoughts about the situation. In the present paper, I transpose my “method” of reflective practice to the field of PhD supervisorship, a professional field in which I am a newcomer (main supervisor for two part-time PhD students since 2019). For this “method” to work, I think that two of the five factors described by Mamede & Schmidt [22] are especially important, namely “an attitude of openness towards reflection” and “meta-reasoning”. Whether or not the present writer is in possession of these skills is of course an open question.

**KOUZES AND POSNER’S MODEL**

The K&P model focuses on leadership behaviours [4] and describes five practices for successful leadership [16]. The five practices are summarised in **Table 1**. Using a spatial metaphor, one could say that a leader, according to K&P, 1) challenges the status quo here and now, 2) points out the way forward, and 3) walks the way herself while 4) equipping and 5) encouraging others to follow. The purpose of the present paper is not to critically review this model, or to compare it to other leadership models. Instead, I will merely use the model as an interpretative lens through which I will examine doctoral supervision, i.e., I will use this particular model to flesh out the hypothesis that doctoral supervision can be understood as a form of leadership. The reason for using this particular model is wholly pragmatic as, as explained above, it is a model which I have been reflecting on in my previous leadership roles. Needless to say, the use of the K&P model does not mean that I “absolutize” it above and over other models of leadership. Rather, the K&P model has been a convenient starting point for a pragmatic exploration of supervisorship as leadership. If this exploration proves to be at all fruitful (which I hope to show below), the only thing that will have been achieved is a certain kind of “conceivability”. In other words, if as I hope to show it makes sense to look at supervision through the lens of the K&P model, then it would seem sensible to examine the hypothesis of doctoral supervision as a kind of leadership in future research papers. Hence, the present-paper could be viewed as a hypothesis-generating endeavour.

**Table 1:** The five practices for successful leadership according to James M. Kouzes & Barry Z. Posner [16].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Short description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Model the way: clarify values & set the example | Clarify values by finding your voice and affirming shared values.  
Set the example by aligning actions with shared values. |
| Inspire a shared vision: envision the future & enlist others | Envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities.  
Enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations. |
| Challenge the process: search for opportunities & experiment and take risks | Search for opportunities by seizing the initiative and looking outward for innovative ways to improve.  
Experiment and take risks by consistently generating small wins and learning from experience. |
Enable others to act: foster cooperation & strengthen others

Foster collaboration by building trust and facilitating relationships.
Strengthen others by increasing self-determination and developing competence.

Encourage the heart: recognize contributions & celebrate the values and victories

Recognize contributions by showing appreciation for individual experience.
Celebrate the values and victories by creating a spirit of community.

LEE’S CONCEPTS OF DOCTORAL RESEARCH SUPERVISION

Anne Lee is the author of a textbook on research supervision, now its second edition [19]. The layout of the book is based on the five concepts described by the same author in a peer-reviewed article [18], and the present paper will refer to the article. Based on a review of the literature, and through the filter of interviews with experienced supervisors, Lee described a framework of doctoral research supervision summarized by five key concepts (Table 2). Lee’s paper has been cited 202 times according to Web of Science (accessed 2 January 2020), and a review of the titles of the papers citing Lee’s work did not reveal any obvious connection to leadership issues, except in one case – and that particular paper turned out to be about team supervision issues, for instance concerning the power dynamics of the team [11]; the present paper does not raise the issue of team supervision.

Table 2: Lee’s five concepts of doctoral research supervision [18].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Lee’s explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functional</td>
<td>The issue is one of project management. The supervisor rationally monitors the development of work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enculturation</td>
<td>The student is encouraged to become a member of the disciplinary community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>The student is encouraged to question and analyse their work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emancipation</td>
<td>The student is encouraged to question and develop themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship development</td>
<td>The student is enthused, inspired, and cared for.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RESULTS

To summarize the methodology, I will now, as a “reflective practitioner” and in a hypothesis-generating fashion, examine what doctoral supervision represented by Lee’s Concepts of doctoral research supervision looks like when viewed through the lens of the K&P leadership

---

a In addition to using the word “concepts”, Lee also uses the words “approach” and “categories” to describe her main findings, stating that the two latter words “are used … to refer to the pragmatic level, the action informed by the concept”.

---
model. We will look at Lee’s five concepts one by one, in the following order: functional, enculturation, critical thinking, emancipation and relationship development.

**FUNCTIONAL**

Lee states that many books on research supervision emphasize this aspect of doctoral supervision, which has to do with directing and managing the project. These books are “instruction manuals” that are “full of practical advice”, and according to Lee “the functional approach is the one which sits most closely with the professional role of the academic” [18]. However, using the K&P practices described in Table 1 as a lens, it seems *prima facie* difficult to view the functional approach as a form of leadership. This will be discussed more extensively below.

**ENCULTURATION**

The enculturation approach means that the PhD student is socialized into the community of research practice. The supervisor has a high authority, but at the same time there is a personal interest and dedication, “like the family doctor”, the supervisor acting like a gateway to an academic network and potentially being viewed as a role model [18]. Here, there are parallels to the K&P practice “model the way”. Indeed, the semantic correspondence in the previous sentences (“role model” vs “model the way”) is striking. As described in Table 1, “model the way” has to do with setting an example and doing so is arguably part of an enculturation process. It is difficult to envisage that enculturation could take place without the supervisor actually acting in a way congruent with “model the way” according to Table 1. Hence, the enculturation concept of supervision can be viewed as at least partly a leadership concept.

**CRITICAL THINKING**

The critical thinking approach means that the supervisor challenges the doctoral student to question and explain how he/she thinks. There is also here a semantic parallel between the previous sentence and the leadership practice “challenge the process” – namely the word “challenge”. I do not think this is merely a semantic coincidence, rather, I think the semantic overlap is grounded in the fact that one of the key behaviours of a leader is to challenge the follower – and one way a supervisor acts like a leader is by intellectual challenge. As expressed in Table 1, “challenge the process” is about not accepting the status quo, and one of the ways in which a supervisor refuses the status quo is by problematising and sometimes expecting answers to tough questions. Of course, challenging as a leadership behaviour can be about more than thoughts and ideas. But it is not less than that. For instance, the leader can encourage the student to accept tough peer-review comments as learning opportunities and as a possibility for improvement, i.e., to embrace critique. All in all, I think the supervisor concept of critical thinking is congruent with being a leadership behaviour, i.e., it can be viewed as a form of leadership.

---

b In a table in her paper [18], Lee explicitly uses the word “challenge” to summarize the activity of the supervisor when it comes to the concept of critical thinking.
EMANCIPATION

The emancipation approach is about helping the doctoral student to mature and grow into an independent voice through “mentoring” and “supporting constructivism” [18]. The aim is to free the student's own potential. Given what the word “emancipation” means, there is indeed also a clear parallel between Lee’s concept of emancipation and the leadership practice “enable others to act” (Table 1). Hence, this concept can also prima facie be viewed as a form a leadership.

RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The relationship development approach has to do with the unsurprising fact that there is “some evidence that poor emotional intelligence [...] leads [...] to poor completion rates”. There is also here a semantic overlap between the leadership practice “encourage the heart” (Table 1) and how Lee describes this supervisor concept, namely as “a desire to enthuse, encourage, recognise achievement and offer pastoral support” [18] (emphasis added). Once again, I do not think this semantic overlap should be viewed as coincidence. Rather, the relationship development concept can be viewed as a leadership concept.

DISCUSSION

It seems that being a supervisor, as described by Lee [18], is in many ways congruent with being a leader as described by the K&P model; in four cases out of five, I found a certain correspondence between Lee’s concepts and the five practices according to K&P (Table 3).

Table 3: Correspondence between Lee’s five concepts of doctoral supervision and the five leadership practices of the Kouzes & Posner model. The arrows indicate areas of correspondence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lee’s concept</th>
<th>Kouzes &amp; Posner’s practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functional</td>
<td>Model the way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enculturation</td>
<td>Challenge the process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>Enable others to act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emancipation</td>
<td>Encourage the heart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship development</td>
<td>Inspire a shared vision</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hence, viewing PhD supervisorship as leadership seems at least to be a conceivable hypothesis. Of course, being a supervisor has more to it than that, but I contend that the leadership dimension should not be underestimated. Speculatively, one might ask if academics (at least in some contexts) perhaps may view the term “leader” as somewhat
infused with anti-intellectualistic connotations. Is this why doctoral supervision as leadership is rarely discussed in the literature? Or is it the case that some of them conflate the categories of being a manager and being a leader [2]? Not being the former, they do not think of themselves as being the latter. Of course, there is far from one definition of leadership but, all in all, there nonetheless seems to be consensus about its core meaning. Leadership has for instance be described as a process of intentional influence [24], or as influencing others to achieve a common goal or a positive outcome [2; 23], or as a process of social influence which maximizes the efforts of others towards the achievement of a goal [17]. What is striking is the common ground between definitions, not the differences. Using the terminology of influence and common goal, supervision can be viewed as leadership, the supervisor influencing the student in different ways in order to achieve their common goal – the successful defence of a dissertation. Moreover, the doctoral process is often metaphorically described as a journey [14; 25], and the journey metaphor is congruent with a leadership function (c.f., the concept of followership) [6; 20].

The lack of overlap between the concept of “functional” [18] and leadership according to K&P (Table 3) should be noted. If we lay aside the K&P lens, the concept of “functional” could nonetheless be seen as a form of leadership. Take for instance Kurt Lewin’s 1939 classical description of three leadership styles [9; 26]: autocratic leaders (also referred to as authoritarian); democratic (or participative) leaders; and laissez-faire leaders (who are hands off about how followers complete their tasks). If I had used Lewin’s lens instead of K&P, I would have concluded that Lee’s concept of “functional” seems related to some kind of autocratic leadership. This would also have been the case had I used Howell & Costley [13] and their concept of “directive leadership behaviour”. This short discussion reveals a major limitation of the present paper, namely the fact that the choice of “leadership lens” defines what one sees. On the other hand, one could simply point to the basic distinction between being a manager and being a leader, and one could hence say that K&P focus on the latter, whereas Lee’s concept of “functional” is more about managerial skills.

Interestingly, and going back to Lewin’s classical triad, the laissez-faire style has been described in a doctoral supervision context in Sweden [8]. Based on interviews of doctoral students who had dropped-out, Frischer & Larsson described laissez-faire as a major problem for PhD supervision. When one reads the paper by Frischer & Larsson, it is striking that there was a lack of both relationships and structures – in my opinion, this amounts to a lack of real leadership.

In the introduction, some of the challenges of the university hospital as a doctoral environment were reviewed. Given that, for health professionals, part-time doctoral studies is not an uncommon phenomenon [15], and given that part-time doctoral students tend to have dissimilar experiences and situations from full-time students [10; 27], one can ask the question if the role of supervisor might perhaps be even more challenging in such situations. For one thing, the PhD project is more extended over time, making “supervision grit” all the more important. Moreover, the supervisor must understand and respect the professional constraints of the part-time PhD student who is also part of a clinical workplace which has its own expectations. As a doctoral project leader, such a supervisor hence must lead with a lot of emotional intelligence, constantly gauging when to push and when to be more relaxed. Of course, this is always important, but arguably this is not least the case for part-time students in the health professions. All in all, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that the challenge of
the university hospital as a doctoral environment makes it all the more important to infuse the role of the supervisor with a large dose of leadership skills. At the very least, this hypothesis is consistent with my own personal experience, both as a PhD student and now as main supervisor of two part-time PhD students in a university hospital context.

To conclude, it does seem meaningful to look at the practice of doctoral supervision from a leadership perspective, at least in the setting I am most familiar with (part-time doctoral studies in a university hospital). I therefore propose that future studies should examine the hypothesis of doctoral supervision as a form of leadership in a more in-depth fashion, using appropriate empirical methodologies (e.g. perhaps studying the effect of good leadership on completion times, or on drop-out rates) and not as in the present paper mere practice-based reflections.
REFERENCES

