8 Events, leadership and power

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Chapter aims

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☐ Consider the question who leads and when?

☐ Explore the power of leaders

☐ Understand the different types of power

☐ Reflect on the power of events to lead change in society

☐ Reflect on the power of event communities

☐ Discuss the nature of power relationships with event stakeholders

☐ Focus on leadership in action: Industry insight from Carrie Abernathy of the Association for Women in Events.

Introduction

A criticism of many of the conceptualisations of leadership is that they tend to focus on the positive nature of leadership and ignore the issues of power, influence and domination (Bolden, 2011). This really is a key criticism, because when you think about it, how can leadership be untangled from the power dynamics that occur within and around it? Despite the rise in viewing leadership as an influence process, as charted in Chapters 3,4 and 5 of this book, leadership in events is still often attributed to those in formal positions of power – by that I mean those in managerial positions, who have the power to make decisions about their followers working lives, and even – at the extreme end – decide to terminate people's employment. Critics such as Bolden (2011), Alvesson and Spicer (2012) argue that when leadership is the preserve of those in managerial positions, then the dynamics of who holds the power in the relationships are always unequal, and it is impossible to overcome these inequalities, because one person is always in a stronger position than the other. This chapter therefore gives the reader a brief

overview on the power of leaders in events, and an insight into both the benefits and issues of that power.

A second level of concern is also leadership within the events community – who is it that brings people and organisations together? What does it take to achieve effective collaboration among events and between events and other key stakeholders? This might be a matter of individual leaders taking charge, but equally it could be that leadership emerges from specific network dynamics. In viewing leadership as both a process of influence *and* a process of power, we can gain useful insights into the power relationships that may be at work.

Who leads, and when – and what does that have to do with power?

Whilst large parts of this book have been concerned with the democratisation of leadership, there is no denying the continued emphasis within the event industry of the role of the formal leader. Most event organisations are structured around a typical hierarchical structure, with organisational teams each managed by team leaders, and a chain of command that reaches up to a leadership team who make the strategic decisions on the vision and direction of the organisation. It is risky then for us to ignore the role of a formal leader when – in nearly every type of organisation – they are still an essential part of the structure. Indeed, as I suggested in Chapter 5, researchers now recognise that in order to fully understand leadership processes, both vertical (top-down leadership) and collective leadership throughout the organisation need to be considered (Day et al. 2004, Ensley et al. 2006).

Unlike other industries, such as banking or manufacturing, the output of the event community is based on the consumption of an experience (Pine & Gilmore 1999). What people pay for, or sign up to, isn't a tangible product and nothing can be taken away (Pernecky, 2015). This intangibility means that perceived consumer experiences are central to a successful event – but it also creates significant challenges in shaping experiences that create a lasting legacy, or changes to consumer thinking and behaviour – which are integral to successful outcomes. Similarly, experiences are also temporary in nature – they are planned for, staged and then they disappear – and this is true even of recurring event

experiences (Bladen et al., 2018). This temporality results in inevitable and ever-growing pressure to deliver – there is only one chance to get things right, and mistakes in planning or delivery are very difficult to rectify when the experience is underway (Van der Wagen, 2006; Bowdin et al., 2011). And, because the work is often geared towards one particular point in time – that of the experience delivery – there is an associated, and increased, risk of job insecurity and poor working conditions, for example very long and unsocial hours. This then leads to the key issue of power – that ever-growing pressure, which culminates in that 'it has to be alright on the night' feeling, means that decisions need to get made quickly, and those that have the power to make the decisions are therefore looked to as leaders (whether they want to be or not). Ultimately during the live delivery of an event, there is usually one person with whom all the decisions rest and power is therefore enshrined in the role – what they decide to do is what will happen.

The power of leadership

What do we mean by power? Power is most commonly defined as the ability of an individual to exercise some sort of control over someone else. Leadership, on the other hand, should not be solely bound up with power – after all, an individual can have the ability to influence others, despite not being in a formal – powerful – leadership position. In other words, people with power have the ability to influence others *and* the ability to exert control over others. Leaders will have the ability to exert influence over others, but they do not necessarily have the power to make people do what they want.

This discussion of the intersection between power and leadership might then be better reframed as a discussion of power and influence. As we have seen throughout this book, leadership is most usefully conceptualised as a process of influence over other people. Many scholars therefore suggest that the group of followers give power to the leader (by accepting their leadership) and are also able to take power away if they become dissatisfied with the leaders. So, leaders must exercise their power carefully because power is simply the right to provide leadership. As Warren Bennis famously suggests, "*leadership is the wise use of power. Power is the capacity to translate intention into reality and sustain it.*"