This chapter outlines our ideas about leadership but, before this, you might like to pause and jot down your own views on these two questions:

- What do you think leadership is? And how does it differ from management?
- What do you think is the best way to learn about leadership?

This book is based on a framework of the 21 Challenges of Leadership drawn from recent research, our working and consulting experiences and a wide reading of the leadership literature. This chapter introduces the framework and our key assumptions about the nature of leadership. But first, where do you stand on this question?

Are you part of leadership?

If you are a professional or a technical expert, perhaps an engineer, a pharmacist or an accountant, you may find yourself handling a lot of people and projects in your work. Perhaps you grumble about this – it is not what you were trained for – but it means that you are becoming a leader. You probably had a long period of education, training and development to acquire your professional expertise – what help can you get with becoming a leader?

You may have the word manager in your job title, but find that leadership is talked about as something beyond managing and even more desirable. In the BBC there is a slogan: ‘Manage well; lead more’. What is the difference?

Although they overlap and are linked, leading is more concerned with finding direction and purpose in the face of critical challenges, whereas managing is about organizing to achieve desired purposes – efficiently, effectively and creatively. The focus on choice and purpose is a reminder that leadership has a moral aspect and is never value-free. Choosing this rather than that involves judgements between what is right and what is wrong.

Managing is more about bringing order and control and implies systems and procedures that you may both welcome and find restrictive at the same time.
In the creative professions and the public services, management can sometimes be a dirty word, with those things done in its name seeming more hindrance than help. This surfaces a puzzle: to be responsive and innovative, enterprises rely more and more upon their professionals and knowledge workers, but such people often resist being managed by others and prefer to manage themselves. For these people to work well together, rather than as isolated individuals, calls for less control and more high-quality leadership.

Leadership is less easy to spot than management. Its presence or absence in a situation is less obvious than the more specific activities of management. Leadership is more sensed or felt, as in, for example:

- Do you feel part of this — project, organization, network? Or not?
- Do you have a sense of collective purpose, a shared understanding and a commitment to what is being done? Or not?
- Do you feel proud of the work you are doing? Or not?

Leadership creeps up on you. Whatever leadership means to you, unlike the promotion to manager, it arrives not with a big bang on a particular day, but almost unnoticed. Leadership creeps up on us because we may not notice the extent of the difference that it makes.

So, are you part of leadership or not? If you are not leading, then what are you doing? — supporting, resisting, bystanding, undermining, cheerleading, … or what? Leadership involves everyone; and everyone involved is doing something.

A leadership model

Leadership is a contested issue. It is much discussed and debated, both practically and theoretically, and means different things to different people in different contexts. There is no one correct definition of leadership, or any one set of personal qualities or competencies that characterize leaders. Despite this, most approaches to leadership development are based on personal competency models and focus upon the individual.

Our model of leadership has three domains (see Figure 1.1), where:

- CHALLENGES are the critical tasks, problems and issues requiring action.
- CHARACTERISTICS are the qualities, competencies and skills that enable us to contribute to the practice of leadership in challenge situations.
- CONTEXT is the ‘on-site’ conditions found in the challenge situation.

All three domains are important: without challenging tasks there is no call for leadership; challenges make great demands on the qualities, abilities and skills of the people in the situation; and leadership is always situated in a particular
context. Because of the complexity of these contexts, there is no one best style or approach that fits all situations.

What are the implications of the three domains for your leadership development?

**The domains of leadership: characteristics, contexts and challenges**

**The characteristics domain**

Many leadership development programmes focus upon personal characteristics. The qualities, abilities, competencies and skills of people are of great importance in leadership situations, but this domain is usually overemphasized. This is partly
a legacy of the ‘Great Man’ era that saw leadership as the province of outstanding individuals with rare personal qualities. This still pervasive tendency is allied to a training tradition that focuses on individual knowledge and skills. Together, these two traditions conspire to encourage an individualistic and one-size-fits-all approach to leadership.

Leadership development based on models of individual characteristics or competencies is often helpful for personal development, but does it lead to useful action in the organization? These characteristics matter, but take their meaning from our ability to contribute and participate in leadership practices with others.

**The context domain**

This domain is generally neglected in most leadership programmes. Yet leadership is always situated: always done here, with these particular people; it is always local and contextual. Context is vital: what works here and now may not work in another place and at another time. There is no right way to lead: if you do get it right here and now there is no guarantee that this will work in the same way in another situation, or even in the same situation some time later.

Generic leadership characteristics are context-free, but leadership challenges are always contextual, always situated with particular people in specific circumstances. Context emphasizes the collective nature of leadership; it is about working with others in a concerted endeavour to create something of value.

**The challenges domain**

Although acknowledging the importance of context and characteristics, this book emphasizes the domain of Challenges. Leadership is principally concerned with recognizing, mobilizing and taking action in the face of critical problems and issues. In this view, leadership is defined in action, by what people do in the face of the challenges that they face at home and at work. It is thus a performance art, measured on what we do in this situation, here and now, and not what we are or what we know.

The Challenges domain puts the spotlight more upon the task and the concerted effort at leadership and less upon the individual. Leadership challenges in organizations and communities are usually collective ones, faced by all those in the situation. Although it is individuals who spot and raise challenges, and individuals who make heroic efforts to resolve them, few big challenges are met by one person acting alone. The urgent need is to mobilize the people in the situation, to engage colleagues, networks, communities and whole organizations in the effort to meet and overcome challenges.
Leadership as the collective capacity to create things of value

Look back at Figure 1.1 and place yourself in the centre. Now move out along the arms. As you move towards the Characteristics pole, you move towards the individual and their personal qualities. Move now towards either Challenges or Context and you move towards a more collective and situated view: what can we do about this challenge here and now?

Organizations and communities rarely lack talented individuals, but frequently fail to bring those talents together to create a powerful collective force. In part this is due to old-fashioned thinking. We still seem to think that progress is only made when we have a ‘leader with vision’ who can show us the way. This persistent image damages the collective capacity to do better things.

This image persists because there are so many aspects of life – politics, religion, business, sport and so on – where the leader stands out in front. No wonder then that leadership programmes are modelled on heroic individuals with futuristic visions with the rest of us following on. Does this fit with your view of what is needed in your situation?

Thinking of your own view of leadership, do you see it more as the province of outstanding individuals and heroes? Or as more of a collective spirit, emerging from teams and committed groups? The Challenges approach to leadership sits slightly differently. In seeking to encourage people to tackle their tough problems, the emphasis is not upon the heroic individual, or upon the undifferentiated team or community, but on the connected individual creating a better world in good company.

This puts the responsibility for leadership on you as a person, but in company and relationship with other people. This concept of leadership is more appropriate to the daily complexities of running businesses, services and societies than that of the heroic and isolated leader.

However, there is a snag here: with the heroic leader, when things go wrong it is obvious where the blame lies. With heroes around there is little need for the rest of us to take much responsibility. On the other hand, if leadership is the collective capacity to do valuable things, we can all claim the credit when things go well, but when things go wrong we also have to accept responsibility and seek to learn from the mistakes in order to do better next time.
The 21 Challenges of Leadership

This book is designed around the 21 Challenges of Leadership. These are the problems and opportunities of the day which call for good quality leadership (Figure 1.2).

This figure has two zones: the outer zone consists of 14 Key Challenges that are typical of the kinds of organizational challenges that you are likely to face at work; the inner zone of 7 Core Practices contains the more personal, inner challenges that you face when you engage in leadership. These inner challenges or practices are about action – what you do (and need to do skilfully) – but they are also ways of being – of who you are, and of how you do what you do. The 7 Core Practices link us as individual people to the outer organizational challenges through our actions. It is the quality of your responses to both inner and outer challenges that makes the difference between good and bad leadership.
The 14 Key Challenges

The 14 Key Challenges are representative, but not exhaustive, of the most important leadership challenges of the current era. We have chosen these 14 on the basis of our combined experience of consulting and working with people in many different groups and organizations, and supplemented this by a wide reading of the huge and expanding leadership literature. We have also drawn upon the empirical research on management and leadership conducted by the Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership (CEML), where one of us was Policy Research Consultant.

However, none of this means that these are the right challenges for you. Although they are typical and representative of what we know, your organizational challenges in particular may well be different, and they will certainly be more specific and varied in context. What will be the same is the Challenge approach on which this whole book is based. This holds that leadership is defined by moving towards the challenges that face you and your colleagues, and not by moving away from them or hoping they will go away.

Each of the 14 Key Challenges has its own chapter in the third part of this book. Each chapter provides a template for analysis and action and contains stories, cases, models and tools that will help you and your colleagues get started on these challenges. Even if your particular challenge of the moment is not listed amongst the 14, it is likely that you will find materials here that will help you move towards it. This is not a book to be read respectfully from front to back, but a guide to action. So, use it to pick and choose, to pick and mix, and to take from it whatever you want and can apply.

The 7 Core Practices

The 7 Core Practices (Figure 1.3) are the inner challenges of leadership because they are more personal than the outer challenges. They link us as a people to any organizational challenge through the actions we take. We approach these challenges through our leadership practices – as a builder tackles the building of a house through the laying of bricks, or a doctor practises medicine in the face of illness.

The 7 Core Practices are the core challenges because they all relate to a greater or lesser extent to all those organizational challenges in the outer zone. It is difficult to think of a significant challenge that will not, for example, require you to ask challenging questions or to use your power wisely. The seven chapters contain stories, models, ideas and strengthening activities for the development of your leadership practice. They are development challenges in themselves.