

# Physiotherapy managers' perceptions of their leadership effectiveness: a multi-frame analysis

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## Abstract

**Objectives** The purpose of this study was to investigate the leadership frames of physiotherapy managers in Ireland. To be effective leaders in today's challenging healthcare environment physiotherapy managers must employ a comprehensive, adaptable and balanced leadership style.

**Design** This was a purposive, cross-sectional study.

**Participants** Physiotherapy managers were surveyed using the Bolman and Deal Leadership Orientations Instrument.

**Setting** The survey was administered to members of the Chartered Physiotherapists in Management employment group ( $n = 73$ ) of the Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists via email.

**Results** Forty-five physiotherapy managers responded to the survey to give a response rate of 62%. The human resource frame was the most frequently used (61%) and the political frame was the least (9%). The majority of respondents reported using only one or no frames at all (65%). When asked about their effectiveness as a manager 33% of respondents ( $n = 14$ ) gave themselves the top rating of 5, whereas 19% of respondents ( $n = 8$ ) gave themselves the top rating for their leadership effectiveness. There was a statistically significant trend between the number of leadership frames a physiotherapy manager used and their perceived effectiveness as a manager ( $T_T = 380$ ,  $z = 1.975$ ,  $p = 0.048$ ) and as a leader ( $T_T = 431$ ,  $z = 3.245$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ).

**Conclusions** The physiotherapy managers' use of the human resource frame demonstrates that they see the building of relationships as key to effective leadership. Development of physiotherapy managers' underused skills through appropriate leadership development training may enhance their leadership skill set and make them more confident as leaders.

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## Introduction

The Irish health system is undergoing significant reform with efforts to modernise and improve services and a shift towards primary care as the central focus for the delivery of healthcare [1,2]. The ongoing changes in the health service have and will continue to demand changing work practices for physiotherapists [3]. Other challenges faced by health care professionals in the Irish health system include long

waiting lists, greater demands on healthcare budgets, the introduction of information technology innovations, growth in the incidence of chronic disease and the ageing population [1,2]. Physiotherapy managers hold leadership roles within the physiotherapy profession [4] and as such have an important role in guiding and enabling physiotherapists through this period of change.

As physiotherapy practice evolves, the skills of physiotherapy managers must keep pace [5]. To ensure that staff feel empowered and supported in their work during this period of change healthcare managers must understand the importance of delivering an emotionally and behaviourally intelligent style of leadership [6]. In today's change oriented healthcare environment, leaders need to understand the effect of their

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internal emotion and external behaviour on what people see, hear, and respond to [6].

In the 1980s, Bolman and Deal used existing theories of organisations and leadership to develop an organisational typology to aid the study and understanding of leadership [7]. Their theoretical model is based upon the premise that leaders view organisational experiences according to leadership styles or frames [8]. They define the four frames of leadership as structural, human resource, political and symbolic. Each frame enables a leader to see a given situation from a different perspective [7]. Frames facilitate people to identify problems, diagnose their causes, understand and place meaning on experiences, and develop solutions [9].

The structural frame focuses on the rules, policies, procedures, plans, and goals of an organisation [10]. The human resource frame is concerned with team building, collaboration, communication and helping others [11]. Human resource leaders view people and the shaping of relationships as critical to the functioning and success of an organisation [10]. The political frame involves conflict resolution, power dynamics, networking with stakeholders and mediating between interest groups [10]. Within the political frame, the scarcity of resources such as physical space, funding, prestige, recognition, and personnel are the drivers of personal interactions [12]. In the symbolic frame organisations are viewed as systems of shared meaning that require interpretation by leaders [8]. Symbolic leaders use symbols to capture attention and impart meaning and purpose, they lead by example and are often described as visionary [7].

Bolman and Deal contend that the ability to use more than one frame should improve an individual's ability to act effectively and make clear judgements [13]. Managers who are able to co-ordinate multiple logics, and thus have more choices available, will be more effective than those with a narrow perspective in defining and dealing with organisation problems [7]. The Bolman and Deal leadership theory has been used to examine the leadership styles of occupational therapy programme directors, nursing chairpersons, radiation therapy programme directors and medical residency programme directors [14–18]. Bolman and Deal's model allows assessment of leadership styles through by identifying usage of the four frames, enables comparisons to be made among professionals, leadership gaps to be identified (e.g. the use of no frames or only one frame), and facilitates organisations to plan appropriate development programmes to expand existing leadership skills [18]. While there is a good evidence base for a link between leadership and organisational outcomes in the general literature, and a growing base in healthcare literature [19], to date there have been no studies exploring the leadership styles of physiotherapists. An understanding of the leadership of physiotherapists in leadership roles is needed to promote professional growth, aid self-awareness and enable the design of effective leadership development programmes [20].

The overall aim of this study is to determine the leadership styles of physiotherapy managers by ascertaining which of Bolman and Deal's four frames these leaders use, and further, whether these managers are able to vary their leadership behaviour. Additional objectives of the study were to investigate if there is a relationship between selected organisational and personal demographics and the number of leadership frames used, to measure and compare how physiotherapy managers rate their effectiveness as managers and as leaders, and to explore which factors are associated with self-perceived ratings of effectiveness as a manager and as a leader.

## Methods

An internet-based survey was administered via email to a purposive sample of physiotherapy managers in Ireland. The survey link was circulated by an administrator from the Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists (ISCP) to members of the Chartered Physiotherapists in Management (CPM) group of the ISCP ( $n = 73$ ). To become a member of the CPM group a physiotherapist must be employed in a recognised health or education sector management role and be a member of the ISCP. An administrator from the ISCP acted as a gatekeeper and forwarded information about the study and the survey link to CPM members on the group mailing list. To encourage participation in the study, the CPM Chairperson also made the study information and a hardcopy of the survey available to CPM members attending a CPM meeting. Participants who chose to complete the written version of the survey returned their completed surveys to an envelope which the CPM Chairperson later collected and then forwarded to the primary researcher.

The data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 21 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY). The survey instrument was the Bolman and Deal Leadership Orientation Survey (LOI) [21]. Permission to use the LOI was obtained from the authors. There are two forms of this survey; LOI (Self), which this study used, where respondents rate their own leadership skills, and LOI (Other), where colleagues rate the leadership skills of their leaders. The LOI provides information on the number of leadership frames used, and which predominates. It is made up of four sections.

Section 1 of the survey, "Behaviours", determines leadership frame usage. It consists of 32 items which describe specific behaviours indicative of the four leadership frames. Respondents use a five-point Likert-type to rate how often each item was true for them. The internal reliability of section 1 of the survey has been reported to be very high; Cronbach's alpha for the frame measures ranges between 0.91 and 0.93 [8].

The categorisation scheme of scoring 32 or more on a frame (out of a possible 40) was used in this study. This operational definition of frame usage was based on previous studies that have used the LOI [15,22]. Participants' scores

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