Leading Adult Learning in A World of (Permanent) Crisis: Leadership challenges and practices in a changing world

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Executive Summary

This research report explores how leaders in a wide range of adult learning institutions perceive the key challenges currently facing the sector and the potential future short to medium term challenges. It goes on to look at how leaders are adapting their practices to cope with “the current crisis in adult learning” within an overall context of the credit crisis and the diminution of public support and funding for adult learning. It shows that adult learning leaders are embracing a variety of ways of dealing with the ‘crisis’ and attempting to safeguard their institutions. As part of this there is an increasing debate on the nature of leadership appropriate for the challenging context of adult learning.

Two leadership patterns were broadly apparent from the interviews conducted with the leaders of fourteen adult learning institutions. All recognised the need for organisations to have ‘a culture of change’ and a number of leaders saw this as being achieved through a more distributed pattern of leadership although in practice this tended to be limited to the shift to departmental heads as the key agents of change in the current situation. However, others, rather than distributing, seemed to be consolidating leadership within the highest levels of the college/institution’s hierarchy in order to protect staff and learners – safeguarding through control. Although many leaders were interested in more radical patterns of leadership practice there was little evidence that these were being implemented in any fundamental way. The context of the crisis seems to be consolidating existing patterns of leadership and retarding experimentation rather than encouraging it, albeit within institutions which were involved in a huge array of innovatory activity in other areas.

What was common to almost all the interviewees was that they valued the interview process itself in that it had pushed them to make time to reflect on their leadership and how their practice related to the theoretical model being used to underpin the research and indeed its ultimate effectiveness. It appears that it may not be so important what leadership practices are used, so much as the time given to reflection on leadership so that leadership action is proactive and mindful rather than reactive and hurried, which can be a negative consequence of times of great change.

Introduction

On the 4th February, 2010, Alan Tuckett, Chief Executive of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) said:
The sharp fall in the funding allocations for adult learning in 2010/11 followed an ongoing fall in adult funding since 2003 which has seen a consequential decline in the number of adult learners. It seems a long way from the late 1990’s when lifelong learning had emerged as a major element in future economic development and social inclusion, culminating in David Blunkett’s inspiring introduction to the Learning Age (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) 1998) and a consequential flow of initiatives and funding for adult learning.

The recent decline in adult funding has seen significant changes in the volume and proportion of adult learners in general Further Education Colleges with many Principals shifting resources into 16-19 learners. There have been moves within adult provision away from an openly available offer towards workforce education and training, although the latter recently has also seen cuts.

In addition to the general trend of a diminution in adult funding and a decline in the participation rates of adult learners has been the global credit crisis and the resultant massive growth of public debt. This produced a context in which it was recognised that public funding was entering a period of sustained reduction. In particular it has led to an increasing prioritisation of public expenditure and within the sphere of education funding this has seen a greater emphasis on schools and young people.

This study aims to try and understand how a range of leaders in the field of adult learning perceive the challenges that they are currently facing and to understand how those challenges will develop over the short to medium time period of the next five years. In particular it aims to find out if and how leaders and organisations are changing to confront these challenges and to examine the strategies that are being adopted to confront the adult learning crisis in the UK.

“Last week’s announcement of the reductions in FE funding for adults in England comes on top of year after year of cuts. The overall effect of this has been devastating, as government has shifted from provision responsive to local and individual needs towards employer focused provision. In a society facing the challenge of an ageing demography, when we need to create a knowledge-based economy where the capacity to learn is critical, and given the government’s ambitions for further and higher education, these short-sighted cuts beggars belief.”

(NIACE, 2010)
Research Framework

The researchers utilised the work of Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky in an article in the Harvard Business Review July/August 2009 entitled, ‘Leadership in a (Permanent) Crisis’. The article argues that although current thinking is dominated by the current economic crisis, leaders and organisations need to think not only about getting through the immediate crisis but to recognise we are likely to be entering a "sustained or even permanent crisis of serious and unfamiliar challenges".¹

In essence organisations will need to build the capacity to deal with what they term ‘the new reality’, rather than simply respond with the short term fixes which have served us over the previous decades.

Specifically they argue that leaders and organisations will need to adopt specific organisational features. They are:

- **ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP** (utilising the turbulence of the present to change the key rules of the game, reshape parts of the organisation and redefine the work people do);
- **FOSTER ADAPTATION** (meet the current challenges but also adapt in order to thrive in tomorrow’s world distinguishing the essential from the expendable and running numerous experiments)
- **EMBRACE DISEQUILIBRIUM** (orchestrating the inevitable conflict, chaos and confusion of change so that the disturbance is productive rather than destructive; keeping people in a state that creates enough discomfort to induce change, but not so much that they fight, flee or freeze)
- **CREATE A CULTURE OF COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS** (the most difficult topics need to be confronted, dissenters need to be protected and candour and risk taking need to be embraced)
- **GENERATE LEADERSHIP** (recognising the inter-dependence of people throughout the organisation and generating leadership deep in the organisation – replacing hierarchy and formal authority and giving people at all levels of the organisation the opportunity to lead experiments that will help it adapt to changing times)

¹ The researchers are aware of other publications by Heifetz and Linsky in particular Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading (2002) however for this research only the theoretical perspectives utilised in the article in ‘Leadership in a (Permanent) Crisis’ were utilised to underpin this research project.
• TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF (being optimistic and realistic, finding sanctuaries, reach out to confidants, bring more of your emotional self to the workplace and do not lose yourself in your work role.)

These criteria acted as a rough template on which we based our semi-structured questionnaire that we wanted to explore with leaders in the Adult Learning sector.

Research Methods

The researchers undertook a qualitative study involving an in-depth semi-structured interview with fourteen Principals, Chief Executives or Senior Manager lasting approximately one to one and a half hours.

The interview was built around four key overarching questions:

• What are the key challenges facing leaders of adult learning in the current climate of reduced public provision for adult learning?
• What are the key challenges and issues that sector leaders will face over the next five years?
• How are sector leaders changing their leadership practices to deal with the current situation and what strategies are they likely to adopt to support their organisations to flourish in a context of potential ‘permanent’ crisis?
• How are individual leaders and organisations managing human, financial and organisational resources to confront present and future challenges?

These four overarching questions provided the opportunity to discuss and explore specific issues that emerged. It was felt that this method afforded the opportunity for a deeper and more reflective response than might have been achieved with a questionnaire, although we recognise that this restricted the coverage of the sector. The Principals or Chief Officers were chosen from throughout the adult learning sector.

The Principals or Chief Officers were from a diverse range of organisations in the sector. The interviews were with the heads of four general education colleges of varying sizes, one with an adult residential college, one with an adult designated college, one with a private training provider, one with a land based college, one with a local authority provider, one with the Skills manager of a Regional Development Agency, one with a national adult education provider, and three with national adult education organisations. It was felt that this represented a valuable cross-section of providers and representative organisations of the adult learning sector.
Research Findings

College A is a general further education college in London with a turnover of £25 Million. The College has 10,000 students of whom over 8,000 are adult learners. It is located within one of the most deprived boroughs in the country and has a large proportion of second language speakers. The interview was conducted with the Principal and he identified the following as the key challenges that he was currently facing:

- The need to push forward quality improvement, in particular teaching and learning success rates.
- The challenge of making the college financially sound – in particular reducing the college deficit and moving into surplus.
- Turbulence in the system – including the loss of £2 Million of traditional adult work and moving learners from short to long course provision involving a sharp fall in total learner numbers with a consequential negative impact on college relations with the local community.
- The college has moved into delivering Train to Gain and works more closely with employers. However in the context of high local levels of worklessness, supporting learners to move into work seems more important to him that upgrading the skills of those in work.

In terms of future challenges he listed the following:

- Future reductions in funding with his estimate of a 20% reduction over three years.
- Dramatic shifts in the curriculum with a decline in Train to Gain offset by a growth in apprenticeships and opportunities for Higher Education expansion.
- The challenge of accurately identifying future opportunities and partners.
- Securing successful moves into employment for learners.
- Institutional viability – reductions could make the college not viable as an independent entity.

With regard to changing perspective on leadership and organisational change he feels that the current challenges have made no significant difference to his attitude towards leadership. His focus continues to be to try to move the college to good/outstanding, to achieve better communications and to keep staff focused on what the college needs to do. He feels, however, that he will have to do more to manage the climate within the college and how staff feel about the situation. To an extent he believes he has had to ‘embrace disequilibrium’ and ‘make shifts in the management structure, moving people around to key areas’. Communications within the college are crucial to him and his need to achieve a balance between ‘things have got to change’ and ‘shroud waving’. In terms of his own leadership
style he feels a pull between being authoritative and involving staff in decision making, but worries about becoming dictatorial and for him the Harvard Business Review model is ‘out of the window’ because he believes he has become more cautious in the current challenging situation. Indeed he thinks that it would be unwise to develop a distributed leadership model because of the need to deliver specific targets, resulting in less flexibility and possibilities for experimentation. On a personal level however he is aiming to ‘open up’ emotionally as staff have commented that they find him difficult to ‘read’ and prefer it when he shows how he is feeling about events or issues.

Currently he is trying to tread a fine line between ‘crisp planning and decision making’ and the desire to give dissenting voices a space to operate in. He is also acutely aware of the need not to introduce too much uncertainty and in particular to ‘have some certainty about the scale of bad news before you share it’. Finally his aim is to create a climate where staff feel that change is planned, rather than forced or reactive.

**College B** is a small adult residential college with a budget of £1.2 Million and 1500 adult students, mostly part time. The College Principal identified the major current challenges facing her as:

- The funding of adult learning with major uncertainties about the levels of funding and the likelihood of cutbacks.
- The capability and capacity of the College to respond effectively to new initiatives.
- Moving the curriculum offer to meet Government priorities whilst avoiding mission drift is problematic.

In terms of future challenges she feels that the same issues will be broadly relevant although this is coupled with the uncertainties surrounding a potential change of Government. With regard to the changes in leadership practice she believes it is her role to keep an eye on the external environment and keep staff internally galvanised but not complacent. She wants to keep staff fully involved in the whole process of considering the College’s future. At the same time she is conscious that she needs to be tougher, particularly around conduct and capability.

The Principal wants to improve middle managers but feels that some lack people skills. She believes that managing change will be the single most important skill over the coming years and feels that some are not good at this. In particular she thinks many members of staff are very resistant to change and spend time in ‘dynamic conservatism’ fighting change. For her the ‘courageous conversations’ that she needs to have relate to HR issues and the need for tighter working and management procedures. She believes staff are still unaware of the real severity of the situation because the college recently had a financial windfall. As
an individual leader she sees the Principal’s role as having a balance between optimism and pessimism and to show colleagues that she is a strong leader. She thinks that mergers will be on the cards but has worries that the college will be unwilling to face this and like many of her colleagues is looking at her retirement point and wants to leave a viable institution with committed staff and a strong mission.

**Organisation C** is a national organisation committed to the overall improvement of the further education sector. The interviewee is the Chief Executive who was previously a College Principal.

He identified five key challenges for the sector. The first is *known and unknown certainties*. That the sector was in the limelight and in his words ‘*Cinderella has come to the ball and the spotlight is on her*’. The present year with a general election would be critical for the sector. Second are financial pressures and the need to make cuts before they are imposed: in particular the challenge involves managing for the future not the present. Third is maintaining the motivation, commitment and passion of staff. Leaders need to offer job security to staff by achieving cuts through natural wastage. At the same time leaders need to dispel the myth of stability and create a culture in which staff accept the naturalness of change and feel comfortable with it. Essentially leaders should give staff as much control as possible over their own internal lives – ‘*create a cocoon that gives a feeling of power*’. The fourth challenge is to keep a sense of perspective – that we still live in an affluent and comfortable society whatever its defects. The fifth is to remember the importance of relationships.

In terms of future challenges he believed that the challenges would broadly be the same as those currently but the approach to them will need to vary. The Chief Executive believed that the key role of a leader in the sector was to fill the gaps. Leaders do not need to do anything in particular but to make sure that things get done. They need to act only when necessary. Successful organisations have leaders who are extremely adaptable.

He believes that leaders need to set ground rules, and in particular what is non-negotiable. In addition he felt it was important to show that you will take decisions and stick with them. Having a mission for the organisation and how it should move forward was very motivating for staff. The mission should be clear but the leader does not need to organise every detail but to set sensible boundaries.

He felt that rather than ‘courageous conversations’ and the need to ‘embrace disequilibrium’ his preference was to allow staff to contribute with a minimum amount of stress and worry. The job of the leader is to prevent chaos, conflict and confusion and help people to enjoy change. He is cynical about the models of leadership put forward by academic researchers, “They’re often written by people who have never even run a bath”, however he feels any
major changes involve bereavement – a feeling of loss and there is a need to factor this into the pace of change. Change is not generally steady progress and the sector faces two years of very rapid change.

**College D** is an adult college in the South East with an annual budget of £2 Million. The Principal identified the key challenges facing the college as:

- A lack of space.
- The challenge of reforming the curriculum offer and resource base to deliver a 10% funding reduction in the next year and underpinning this a need to secure adequate national funding for adult education.
- The vulnerability of small institutions and remaining independent and surviving in the current financial climate was a significant challenge.

In terms of future challenges she identified:

- Ongoing funding cuts.
- Their accommodation challenge.
- Keeping an effective curriculum with good teaching and learning.
- Shifting the organisational culture to respond to challenges which is difficult due to the historical development of the college and an ageing workforce. Previous leaders had fitted the ‘heroic leader’ model which had produced a governance and leadership culture somewhat lacking self-criticism or self-reflection.
- Need to rejuvenate her personal leadership.

In terms of leadership practices she agreed strongly with the Harvard Business Review model. She strongly supports adaptive leadership, embracing disequilibrium, fostering leadership and creating a culture of informed judgement at every level of the organisation. However set against this is the reality that many ‘followers’ seem happy to sit back and let someone else take the decisions. Although she wants more collaboration and less paternal benevolence, she feels that some in the college are less supportive of a distributed pattern of leadership. Similarly she wants to encourage ‘courageous conversations’ but is aware that some managers feel undermined by this. Allowing dissenters to be heard can involve a level of discomfort for colleagues. However she recognises that she needs to be a tougher leader to foster disequilibrium and discover a college wide appetite for new ways of involving people as ‘**competitive advantage comes from a culture in which all feel able to be involved**’, and that charismatic leaders do not give a real sense of security to their followers, they can create a culture of dependency.
She feels that the college needs to and will confront its own challenges and that mergers are not something she or the Board would welcome.

**College E** is a medium sized general further education college with an annual turnover of £30 Million and in excess of 15,000 learners. The College is a mixed economy – it is the only publicly funded sixth form provider in the area, has a significant Higher Education portfolio with 750 FTE’s, a large Train to Gain contractor and apprenticeships with a still significant proportion of adult learners. The Principal has previously been Principal of a small general further education college. The Principal believes that the key challenges currently facing the college are:

- A lack of political honesty about where the system is going and how it will be funded.
- Managing a significant reduction in funding with a projected fall of 50% in adult funding.
- How to support the most disadvantaged groups in a period of diminished resources.

He believes that these challenges will continue and that the college will have to undergo a fundamental reform of the curriculum and how it is delivered. In essence he is pioneering a new pattern of teaching delivery which will cut the contact hours and will build up learning materials for all courses which will be studied in the fifteen interactive study centres that have been developed across the campus. The system will involve less direct teaching but have more learning coaches who will support learners and develop independent learning, and assessment will be automated as far as possible. It is felt that this will mean up to 10% efficiencies in costs.

The new system is built upon devolving authority and responsibility down through the organisation and also developing internal leadership amongst the student body. Although the model will be developed for all learners it is most clearly targeted at younger learners and will be introduced more slowly amongst adult learners.

The system will be closely monitored, with areas of study not achieving adequate results being subject to a monthly report on attendance and results. In essence he is embracing disequilibrium recognising that the new system will not be acceptable to some staff and arguing that the future of the college rests at the departmental level.

In terms of mergers he believes that there is little appetite particularly amongst governing bodies. He does not believe that the amalgamation of services across colleges produces significant savings, but does see a growing connection between colleges in an area where colleges will utilise strong areas in different disciplines and move students between colleges through free transport systems.
The Principal believes that the future lies in modifying and developing the patterns of teaching and learning to drive down costs and embracing larger numbers of learners.

**Organisation F** is a national membership organisation for adult learning in England and Wales with its key objective to promote the study and general advancement of adult education. The interviewee was the acting Chief Executive. The key challenges facing the organisation were:

- Ensuring the viability of the organisation in public debates on adult learning.
- To be innovative and not simply protective.
- To work more closely with the private sector and the third sector.
- Recognising the changing public attitudes towards choice and personalisation.
- To focus much more closely on the workplace and the role of employers in adult learning.
- To continue to accentuate the wider benefits of adult learning and confront the prejudices of those who see ‘adult education as leisure and further education as grubby technical skills’.
- To bring more diverse groups into the adult education world.

In terms of future challenges he believes first that demography is on the side of the adult learner – that the bulk of future workers are in the workforce and the percentage of workers over the age of 65 will continue to rise. Second the need to understand and confront the issue of sustainability. Third to embrace new technology. He feels that adult learning has been slow to embrace new technologies that could challenge and change ways of learning and ways of grouping learners. Fourth adult learning has to recognise the profound impact of globalisation and in particular the fundamental impact of migration. Finally he thinks that as a society we have to recognise well being and the critical importance of social capital.

In terms of the leadership to confront these and other challenges he sees the importance of de-layering within organisations and colleges. This involves a decline in the size of senior management and a diffusion of authority. He thinks that colleges and adult learning organisations need to use their supply chains to promote their objectives. Colleges and college leaders need to develop the essential skills of listening; they are still often not listening to customers and in particular to employers. Coupled with this he sees the critical importance of flexible staff with more generic skills, less specialisation.

**Organisation G** is a national voluntary organisation providing adults with access to organised learning. It has branches nationwide catering for the educational needs of more
than 95,000 adult students. The interviewee is the General Secretary of the Organisation. The key challenges that he believes adult learning is currently facing are:

- The failure of public policy makers to recognise the value of lifelong learning.
- The continuing decline in public funding for adult learning.
- The need to ensure politicians and others recognise the wider benefits of adult learning.
- The increasing separation of lifelong learning and learning for skills.

In terms of the future he sees an ongoing reduction of public funding for adult learning as the overwhelming challenge confronting the sector. Currently his organisation is working on a 10% annual reduction in SFA funding. However he recognises that this has forced his organisation to look for and to get alternative long term funding from other government departments for core work in areas such as sustainability, health and citizenship. Essentially this has brought in stable funding without shifting or altering the mission of the organisation.

Another key challenge is technology which the organisation has been slow to embrace. On the other hand it does not have the capital problems associated with colleges as it does not own the premises it uses for teaching. However there are ongoing problems with facilities which it needs to confront. Although the organisation is involved in a number of formal partnerships it does not see further mergers as being helpful. What it would like is more collaboration throughout the adult sector overall.

In terms of the leadership and management to confront the challenges he is pushing forward distributed leadership. He feels the organisation has become increasingly adept at accepting and taking decisions within the context of the organisation.

He does not like the terminology of permanent crisis and thinks that although it might create some creativity it could also lead to an acceptance of stagnation or chaos.

He believes that staff will recognise the need for change and embrace it, if they have an understanding and vision of where the organisation is going. This involves informing them of what is happening and that the organisation has an overall response package which involves loss and gain and that this involves ‘growing people into new roles’ He does not use words such as crisis or discomfort but aims to emphasise the positive elements of change, and retain the core elements of the organisation, in particular mutuality.

He is very supportive of staff ‘taking care of themselves’ and that they have important external skills which help the organisation – ‘another nail in the coffin of separating lifelong learning and skills.’
College H is a medium sized general further education college with an annual turnover of £23 Million and in excess of 12,000 students. The Principal see the major challenges currently facing the College as:

- Expecting employers and individuals to support and pay for training in a climate of financial challenge.
- The decline of First Steps learning, learning for health and well being.
- Education for the older generation not being a priority.
- The narrow focus on skills and the consequential pushing out of education for cultural and social mobility.

In terms of the future challenges he thinks that they are:

- The challenge of remaining committed to social inclusion for all age groups in a climate of no political support.
- The challenge of engaging more closely with employers in order to meet training needs.
- Unitised qualifications but within a system which does not have unitised funding.
- Challenge of engaging adults when there is little financial incentive to do so, and to remain engaged with the wider local community (His strategy in this area is to engage with local clubs, societies and organisations which will be invited to use college premises).
- Short term and targeted funding.

The response of the Principal has been to seek alternative sources of funding and to become much more employer focused. In terms of leadership he believes that when strategy is fixed you can lead from the top. However when the situation is less structured you have to disperse leadership because staff, in particular departmental heads, are much more aware of possibilities in their areas of learning and are closer to the learners and employers. He thinks middle managers have become much more entrepreneurial. Developing responsibility however is undertaken with strict accountability procedures. He believes that there are few problems with middle managers embracing leadership roles, rather the problem lies with senior managers who feel that their status and authority is being undermined.

He believes strongly in partnership delivery models, working with private training providers to deliver much of the employer engagement provision, because they are closer to employers, and are more flexible in terms of delivery and often have specialised skills.
He does not think that large federations of colleges are helpful and still believes that colleges should relate to the local borough model. However he does feel that colleges should operate in sub-regional or regional associations in order to strengthen them collectively and individually in terms of procurements and bidding for contracts.

In terms of the curriculum he sees a considerable growth in 16-18 provision with a continuing decline in adult learners – ‘Adults are not the currency that pays the bill – protecting is not the game’. However he sees the 16-25 group as being very important with the limited adult funding being increasingly concentrated on them.

He felt the Harvard Business Review model was a very useful tool for analysing leadership currently in the Further Education sector. Leadership in a period of crisis, he believes, is easier as a steady state often leads to complacency and inertia. Colleges can and should be experimenting, however they need to be careful as the sheer volume of change, although invigorating can sometimes be destabilizing. He sees the current context as showing that leadership and staff can balance a diverse workload and requires less of the heroic leader and more distributed more shared leadership. In addition it is increasingly in the institution’s interest to really look after staff as the amount of slack in the system is reduced – work-life balance is crucial for this.

Organisation I is a national network of adult learning providers, including local authority maintained, voluntary and community sector organisations that deliver local learning opportunities for adults. The interviewee was the Chief Officer of the Organisation. The Chief Officer sees the key challenges facing the sector in the current situation as:

- A total confusion about the role and nature of lifelong learning, compounded by the alarming decline in funding. He believes that this is and will lead to a decline in specialist provision with some services disappearing.
- Bringing together the current context and the future scenario he thinks that providers are focussing on short term problems and have not fully recognised that it is likely to be an ongoing process. The local authority sector is in a quandary as to its role and future direction – in particular whether it will have a strategic rather than a delivery role. Within the local authority sector he sees different scenarios being played out but is worried that much of this is about risk aversion rather than risk taking.
- The organisations that have been least affected are those that have always paid attention to performance management and adopting best practice. He sees an increase reliance on fees and full cost recovery with increasingly little or no public funding.
- Corporate strategy and local political differences getting in the way of working together (he cited the example of two local authority providers, currently unviable but
who together could make a coherent service who were blocked from merging because of the potential impact on other services such as payroll and HR).

- The need for a greater use of virtual learning but the difficulties of this with the dispersed nature of the provision and the lack of a technical infrastructure.
- The huge difficulty of a lack of capital in the sector and the poor quality of much of the infrastructure.
- The nature of the workforce, largely part-time who remain traditional in attitude in terms of teaching and learning and the interaction with the learners.
- The need to engage with a broader agenda – health, crime, well being – and with different venues (care homes) – and with alternative sources of income.

The sector is embracing many of these developments but the scale and rate of change is very varied across the sector. Distributed leadership is well understood and embraced in the sector, however it is difficult to persuade people down the hierarchy to take risks. Embracing disequilibrium is attractive to the interviewee but managers in the sector are often averse to change. The sector is very traditional and likes to be ‘fuzzy’ and well liked and very averse to putting people into discomfort.

He sees real difficulties for the sector with whole areas of learning moving out of regulations and maybe not inspected which means it becomes non-fundable. Finally, he stated that although the situation nationally ought not to look too bad there was strong evidence that it could be disastrous on a local level and was already in a very volatile situation.

**Organisation J** is a Regional Development Agency and the interviewee is the Skills Director with responsibility for Regional Skills. She believes that the current challenges for the sector are:

- Knowing what to focus on in a period of government policy overload – national/regional skills strategies. Different funding methodologies and different local pressures – who should they listen to?
- Unpicking the rhetoric of policy.
- A funding methodology which is concentrated on funding individuals whilst colleges and delivery agencies are being told to concentrate on the needs of employers (with the example of hairdressing which many individual learners want to study but which is not seen as a priority by policy makers).
- The short term funding cycle – impossible to shift provision with funding within one year cycles.
- Initiative overloads making the sector too reactive.
- Too many colleges doing the same things rather than building up specialisms.
In terms of future challenges she believes that the sector is entering a period of immense turbulence for at least two years and that uncertainty will make planning and organisation very difficult. If the same structures (SFA, LAs, RDAs) continue then it will be almost impossible for the leaders and managers to run efficient and effective delivery organisations. In terms of adult skills she believes that there will have to be a different funding basis with far more co-financed strategy, raising fees from employers and individuals. Train to Gain has distorted the training market and it will take time for employers to recognise the need to pay higher fee levels.

Looking at colleges from the outside she is very aware of the differences between them. There are extremely good examples of colleges with entrepreneurial leadership who have embraced the changing demands from employers and students but many remain rooted in older patterns of delivery. She believes that increasingly departments within colleges will become as, if not more, important than colleges. Departments are generally the key contact for employers. However she feels that there may be difficulties with pioneering departments within colleges in terms of their ability to operate independently within an overall culture. She also believes that there will be more mergers and shared services in administrative areas and also some rationalisation of courses and location, although colleges still seem too bureaucratic, too wedded to systems and risk averse behaviour.

In terms of the Harvard Business Review model she sees it as not being particularly applicable to colleges in that colleges are more often than not reactive rather than proactive and that they are too controlled by outside agencies in terms of funding, operational activity and quality control.

**College K** is a land based college with a turnover of £14 Million and around 4,000 students of which close to 3,000 are adults. The Principal felt that the key challenges facing the college in the current situation were:

- Managing the growth of 16-18 year old provision and at the same time modifying the adult programmes to fit into the changed college priorities (essentially offering more short courses, more high fee income courses aimed at higher income groups, more evening provision and more higher level courses).
- Addressing adult skills in rural communities with pockets of deprivation in a context of reducing the number of outreach centres (working with outside agencies and utilising their premises) – recognising that the community needs are not really being met.
- Developing CPD programmes for the big food companies.

In terms of the future challenges facing the college she feels that College strategic planning has a six month horizon and that is being generous. The college is in a constant state of
reaction. Within the college she has developed a Scenario Planning exercise which offers 4 scenarios – Tropical, Temperate, Tundra and Arctic (Tropical 2% drop in overall funding, Arctic a 10% decline). Wants to develop a college response to each scenario involving all staff (‘currently everybody is going round saying it’s Tundra at the college’).

In this process she has fully involved all staff, trying to let go of power and empower staff. To her, departmental heads are the key to the whole process. The process of change and adaptation are primarily internal and she sees little benefit in mergers or even collaborations apart from the sharing of transport with other colleges in terms of the rural locations of many learners.

She believes further education is very good at adapting to change. She sees crisis leadership as being two phased – because it takes time to properly embed change and constant change weakens the ability to embed. She feels that embracing disequilibrium is not really a new idea and that much of further education has been in this position for some considerable time. She believes the key to managing change is the management style which above all is about resourcing and empowering staff. Principals have too much responsibility and need to spread this responsibility.

College L is a large general further education college which was recently created by a merger between two general FE colleges within the same local authority area. It has a turnover of £56 Million and close to 15,000 students with 9,000 adult learners. The interviewee was the College Principal. In terms of the challenges currently facing the sector he thinks these are:

- There is no agreed definition of adult learning and without this he sees little hope for it being properly resourced.
- The government has got itself into a real quandary with its splitting of learning for leisure and learning for skills without recognising the interconnection between the two.
- One of the colleges in the merger failed to recognise the growing importance of 16-18 provision and retained a preponderance of adult learning. This is a situation which needs to be addressed.
- Managing the decline of adult learning and in particular the implications of having a very reduced first stage provision
- Managing the decline of adult learning and pressures from the local community for its ongoing provision. This has particular ramifications for the college as it positions itself as the college for the community.
In terms of the future challenges he recognises that funding will be increasingly restricted and that colleges will have to look for alternative sources for funding adult learning and is expecting to do this through learning partnerships, working with the National Health Service, the local authority and local interest groups. He also believes that Train to Gain has seriously distorted the market in adult skills and made it very difficult for colleges to work with employers and in particular to get them to pay for adult training. He recognises the unitisation of qualifications as being crucial for future development and in creating a truly flexible system which relates to employer needs.

In terms of leadership and management he sees that those who emerged out of colleges in the 1980’s were reared on certainty management and a kind of ‘heroic leadership’; they were strongly business orientated and saw themselves as the colleges of the community, responding to local needs and requirements. He recognises that although this remains a very appealing mode, that it will have to change, and that no particular model will be appropriate. There will need to be more individuality and a dispersal of leadership but within the overall need to protect the local reputation of the college.

**Organisation M** is a large metropolitan authority in Yorkshire. She controls a budget of £6 Million. In terms of the current challenges facing the adult learning sector she identified:

- The demand to do ‘more for less’ – to deliver more for less money.
- Managing a learning delivery service within a larger organisation which has changing imperatives and broader funding constraints.
- The constant need to ratchet up quality and success rates and the tension between widening participation and measuring quality by success rates.

She sees these challenges continuing and worsening in the coming years with a need to re-prioritise in terms of the curriculum offer and restructuring involving redundancies. Another problem is the growing contradiction between LSC strategy and the local authority strategy. She has to manage a scenario with LSC funding but is being pulled into the local authority reorganisation agenda. Added to this is the increasing strategic role the local authority will assume and that it will become a commissioning body rather than a provider of education and training.

In terms of the leadership requirements she thinks fast problem solving and the need to make quick decisions is essential. The interviewee is about to leave her current post and the need to make quick decisions on limited information is one of the reasons for this. She feels drowned in the plethora of policies that are being issued, and requiring a rapid response. This has tended to modify her own leadership and management style, with little or no time for reflection and less time for focusing on people and managing relationships. Her
leadership has become increasingly based on task and finish, driven by performance indicators which are set by others. At the back of this is a constant dual mantra of ‘cut and improve, deliver better with less’. This she feels is impossible.

The local authority top down model has created a culture in which staff focus on ‘covering their backs’ rather than focusing on the service and the learners. Rather there should be systems that allow people to be very creative. She is not sure that the idea of ‘embracing disequilibrium’ is always appropriate or if helps to bring about a ‘creative culture’ which she does think is important although a lot depends on at what ‘stage of development’ an organisation is. Within her work what has been effective has been ‘keeping the LA at bay’ and resisting the corporate encroachment with the Unit’s work.

She feels that situational leadership, which is flexible and relates to the current situation is needed.

**Organisation N** is a work based learning private training provider, an employer owned independent company with a turnover of £8 Million per annum. The company was formed in 2000 and delivers training for between 3,000 to 5,000 individuals from short courses through to full apprenticeships. The deliver is split 60% apprenticeships, 30% other learning and 10% higher education courses. The company serves the manufacturing, engineering and science sectors and the interviewee is the Managing Director. He perceived the key challenges facing his organisation at the current time as:

- The recession which has seen a recent decline of around 8% in provision.
- The reduction in LSC funding is an issue but not as important as for traditional adult learning organisations as they are not so reliant on a single funding source.
- The transition from free courses to fee paying provision – how to change the ‘hand out for free’ culture.
- Maintaining capability – the average age of his work force is in the mid 50’s with employees coming into a training role at the latter end of their career after gaining industrial experience. There are recruitment issues.

He feels that is will not get easier over the next five years and that we are living in a world of ‘permanent crisis’. There is a need to be clear about the organisation’s strengths and weaknesses and to be constantly aware of the changing policy context – funding, regional priorities and policies, economic trends etc. For him and his organisation he feels a special responsibility for SMEs. A further issue is the rapid pace of technological change and its potential impact on provision, although it is often not easy for a mature workforce to embrace such changes.
In regard to his leadership and management he utilises his past experience in industry and the need for ‘broad scanning’ – that is the ability to see what is on the periphery, not just what is immediately in front. Being able to see what might be coming and how it will impact on the company – ‘it is like sitting in a crow’s nest on a ship’ – being able to see as far ahead and as far to the side as possible. He feels that the majority of the work based learning sector in the private sector do not have this skill, and therefore often get stuck in current trends that rapidly shift and change. This ‘broad scanning’ needs to embrace an international dimension.

He thinks that it is not possible for organisations to work in isolation and to continue what they have always done. It leads to a tendency to retreat into ‘bunkers’. What is needed is to engage in mature discussion with other providers and play to each other’s strengths and to help each other in a non-competitive way to grow the market.

He thinks that leaders will need to acquire new leadership skills for the new environment – within ‘broad scanning’. This should involve being imaginative, challenging, receptive and open minded, allied with the other key competencies of communication and inclusion.

He thinks that managers do not have all the answers and they need help from employees but the mantra that ‘everybody is a leader’ does not find favour with him. For him it is the leader’s role to come up with ideas and to challenge fixed notions and the status quo, but at the same time it is important to empower staff to come up with different solutions and have the confidence to run with them.

In certain respects he agrees with the Harvard Business Review model. He feels 3 year strategic plans are a waste of time, rather they should have a rolling business plan that allows changes in direction rather like a ‘zigzagging path’.

He sees the critical importance of allowing individuals to experiment and fail and sees overactive risk management as a barrier to change and development. He feels that Further Education is still stifled by bureaucracy, with managers not being given the space in which to manage.

He thinks that the key to the future lies in successful networking to form ‘cohesive nodes’ around specialisms. He believes that you cannot do what you have always done but need to concentrate on what you do well and grow around this.

In terms of taking care of himself he has changed over time recognising the importance of personal space and separating oneself from work.
Finally, he stressed that leadership in the private sector should not be viewed as different from other areas of adult learning. Organisations need to be ‘thrifty’ and that similarly leaders need humility and thriftiness.

**Conclusions**

Our research suggests that there are some common challenges facing the different areas of the adult learning sector but also some differences. Shining through the responses was a belief that adult learning was at a critical juncture but the majority believed that they could move forward within a changed external environment – optimism was much more prevalent than pessimism.

All of the interviewees noted the reduction of adult funding and its likely ongoing diminution and perceived it as a massive challenge underpinning all of their work. In addition all of the interviewees had issues specific to their individual institutions but there were two types of issues that surfaced throughout most of interviews.

The first of these were essentially about managing the reduction in public funding and specific issues such as moving towards government priorities whilst retaining the mission of the institution, continuing to support disadvantaged groups, negotiating the boundaries around government priorities, employer priorities and the needs of individual learners and retaining the support of the local community in this period of transition and change.

The second type of challenge relates to those around leadership and management and may be summarised as worries about the capacity of adult learning institutions to respond to the scale and nature of the changes in adult education policy and funding, maintaining the motivation and commitment of staff to the institution, the feasibility of developing a culture of change in the institution, working on short term challenges whilst retaining a long term mission and patterns of working and finally mobilising staff who are often part-time and have been socialised into an adult learning culture which is ‘fuzzy’ and is about being nice to people, both staff and learners. The second type of challenge is directly applicable to the core of this study which is about leading and managing in a constantly changing environment.

To examine these in some detail we have applied our findings from the interviews with the theoretical model developed in the Harvard Business Review article. Those key elements are:

- Adaptive Leadership
- Fostering Adaptation
- Embracing disequilibrium
- Creating courageous conversations
- Generating leadership
- Taking care of ourselves

It should be said at the outset that the vast majority of the interviewees found the article helpful in articulating their thoughts about leadership at the current time. A number felt that the model was not particularly appropriate to the further and adult education sector, most particularly because they felt they had been working in a crisis situation for some time and the credit crisis merely exacerbated rather than created a radically new context in which to operate.

1. Adaptive Leadership and Fostering Adaptation

The vast majority of interviewees were convinced that they needed to utilise volatility in order to reshape the organisation, changing the rules of the game and redefining what staff do. It has made them think more clearly about the fundamental mission of the organisation and how it can be best served in a changing world, and one, in particular where public support for and public financing of adult learning is diminishing. Clearly much of this thinking is not new – features such as the diversification of income streams has been present for some time, but there does seem to be an acceleration of what might be termed adaptive leadership. In particular this relates most clearly to organisational structure, not only to make it ‘leaner and meaner’ and more fit for purpose, but to try to make adaptation and creativity not just a part of senior management thinking but something that runs through the organisation. The clearest example of this is the reduction in senior management personnel and the increasing reliance on middle management as a source of organisational renewal.

Although a small number of organisations were consolidating power and influence within the hierarchy of the organisation this was being done so as to minimise the impact of difficult times on staff, the vast majority were turning their backs on this, recognising that the future health of the institution depended on vitality and creativity at all levels, although this tended to be concentrated in actuality on middle managers within institutions rather than throughout the whole organisation.

The use of the department/faculty as a crucial element for the future of the organisation was a fairly common theme running through institutions. In some respects it was a reflection of external views of the organisation in that employers, in particular, were directly concerned with departments, rather than with overall colleges. This relationship, alongside an increasing move towards specialisation within institutions was being reflected in organisational structures with departments often being at the cutting edge of development. This was reflected in its most radical form at College E where the changes taking place
involved significant changes to the curriculum, to the pattern of delivery of learning and to the organisational culture to support it. It was the most radical initiative in terms not only of teaching and learning but also on its impact on the organisation of the college and the creation of an adaptive leadership based on departments as the core of future educational development.

In terms of dealing with current problems whilst adapting to a different long term future there was less unanimity. For many they could not really differentiate between the short and long term issues, because of the constant changes in government policy which made long term planning a risky endeavour especially when funding agencies could retrospectively change payment arrangements, as had happened with Train to Gain and the capital situation. All recognised the value of long term planning but the majority saw the need to build in adaptability to a volatile situation which they perceived to be almost endemic to the system.

2. Embracing Disequilibrium

This concept was the one which most excited the interviewees whether they agreed or disagreed with its utilisation. In addition the responses were much more polarised over this concept. On the one hand there were a majority of leaders who quite clearly felt that it was not their role to ‘orchestrate conflicts and losses’ for the benefit of the organisation, rather it was their role ‘to do more to manage the climate within the college’ – ‘to be more dictatorial and more cautious’ and to ‘have some certainty about the scale of the bad news before you share it’ – ‘to create a cocoon that gives a feeling of power’ and ‘allow staff to contribute with a minimum amount of stress and worry’. There was with this group a belief that the discomfort and disequilibrium was something which should be borne by the senior manager in the institution – the ‘leader as martyr’.

The second group were much more aware of the positive aspects of disequilibrium and of its potential for creating beneficial changes in the organisation. In particular they saw it as addressing cultural change within the organisation – ‘charismatic leaders do not give a real sense of security to their followers, they can create a culture of dependency’ Involving staff in decision making and laying before them the reality of the situation, however bleak, was seen as providing an antidote to the ‘the dynamic conservatism’ which is often a key feature of staff in the sector. However, it should be said that even amongst this smaller group of leaders in the sample there was a partial embracing of disequilibrium rather than a full acceptance of it as advocated in the Harvard Business Review model – ameliorating and utilising elements of disequilibrium rather than fully embracing it.

A further element in this debate revolved around the perceptions of leaders in the sector about their staff. Many referred to their staff as being essentially ‘nice people’ who taught ‘nice students’. That the environment in which they operated was one which was pleasant
and non-conflictual and that everybody ‘wanted to be well liked’ and hated putting people into discomfort. Similarly there was perceived to be a fear of change in the adult learning sector. Many of the staff were part-time and undertook teaching out of a love for their subject. They in particular were often very averse to anything that changed their relationship with their students and felt little sympathy with management and the external forces to which they were being subjected.

3. Creating a Culture of courageous Conversations

The idea that leaders should confront the most difficult topics that dissenters should be protected and risk taking embraced again elicited a mixed response from the interviewees. There was a similar split, as it would be expected, as there had been on ‘embracing disequilibrium’ – with the majority feeling that this would not take forward organisations but lead to a lack of control and a lack of focus on the immediate needs of institutions. On the other hand a small number of three leaders wanted to embrace dissenters within the organisation, arguing not only that this was one of the key enduring features of adult learning but also that it led to a vibrant, creative organisation. There was some debate about what dissenters were and whether all dissenters should be protected. Were we talking about dissenters of all types or specific dissenters? In particular were we talking about protecting and nurturing those with radical values and perspectives or should we include ‘conservative’ dissenters opposed to changes per se? However, even those wishing to embrace dissenters within the organisation felt that there was a real tension between it and having clear organisational objectives and coherent planning. There was a real fear that allowing individual experimentation could lead to destabilisation within the institution. Further embracing dissenters could involve a level of discomfort for colleagues, in particular senior management colleagues.

With regards to risk taking there was a similar mixed response. Undoubtedly the majority of interviewees wanted to encourage risk taking amongst staff and in particular amongst senior and middle managers. Interestingly the encouragement of risk taking was still seen within a hierarchical framework with its concentration on middle and senior staff. There was little concern to generate risk taking amongst ordinary members of staff, although there was a kind of assumption that departmental managers should be encouraging a more experimental attitude amongst their staff.

There was a clear movement to encourage middle managers to embrace risk taking, however there was a concern about the impact of this on the organisation as a whole. Leaders recognised the benefits of dynamic departments but at the same time recognised that this could have a detrimental impact on other parts of the college. Riding the joint horses of departmental independence and institutional solidarity was a feature that many recognised as a difficult factor for the future in many organisations. The private training
interviewee felt that the culture within mainstream FE was suffused with an overactive zeal for risk management which held back experimentation.

4. Generating Leadership

On this concept; that of generating leadership deep in the organisation, replacing hierarchy and formal authority and drawing on the collective intelligence of the organisation there was the largest amount of unanimity amongst the interviewees.

For some time there has been an ongoing debate around leadership in the sector, and in previous research we have pointed to the different styles of leadership practised in the sector. The different types of leadership were categorised as:

- Distributed leadership – a deliberate diminution of the power to control thereby unlocking talent by encouraging distributed leadership throughout the college.
- Reputational Leadership – utilising the reputation of the college.
- Performance Management – clear specific goals which set the emphasis for college activities.
- Transformational Leadership – creating the structure and systems that allow people throughout the organisation to make decisions.
- Centralised Leadership – power concentrated at the centre in terms of policy and finance.
- Situational – operating a flexible operational leadership responding to the immediate context.

There seems little doubt that distributed leadership is the style currently in vogue, largely as a response to the highly centralised systems that operated during the 1990’s, and this was mirrored in the response of the interviewees where the vast majority supported increased distribution of leadership. However, there was also a feeling that many were operating within ‘a culture of delegation upwards’ and ‘that followers are happy to sit back and let someone else take the decisions’. Within this context there often seems to have been a consolidation of overall power at the apex of the organisation and a wider distribution of responsibilities amongst senior and middle managers rather than to all levels of staff. Distributed leadership is often more rhetoric than reality.

Aligned to this was strong recognition that many institutions were pushing departmental or middle manager leadership. However, there was also a concern amongst some institutions about the impact this was having on senior managers who saw their ‘status and authority being undermined’ by these initiatives. Undoubtedly some leaders found this useful in terms of shaking up their organisations.
One final point that should be borne in mind in the discussions about distributed leadership is the possible different interpretations that leaders and staff might have about distributed leadership. A recent report in F.E. Focus in the Times Educational Supplement (26.2.2010) commented on ‘a gulf between the extent to which managers say they consult staff and the degree to which those employees feel consulted’.

5. Taking Care of Yourself

‘Finding sanctuaries, reaching out to confidants, bringing more of your emotional self to the workplace and not losing oneself in your work role’ again commanded some support from the interviewees. Interestingly leaders were more concerned about their staff displaying these qualities and were very aware of the need to care for the well being of staff and to utilise the full range of their skills.

Leaders displayed ambivalence around the concept of ‘taking care of yourself’. On the one hand they saw the sense of it but at the same time for some there was a kind of ‘self flagellation’. They felt that it was part of their responsibility to take on all of the responsibilities for their institution, another instance of ‘martyr leadership’.

Summary

The research has found that leaders in the adult learning sector are acutely aware of the challenges facing the sector and are thinking deeply about how they should deal with these challenges. There is clear evidence that leaders are articulating a much more distributed pattern of confronting the challenges. However it would be extremely helpful to see if these views are mirrored by staff and whether they perceive and accept their role within this process – this is clearly an area which would benefit from further research.

The Adult Learning Sector is embracing a huge array of innovatory activity to confront the crisis. However this appears to be being introduced within a leadership context in which there seems to be only minimal changes to or distribution of leadership.

Our major conclusion is that whilst finding many of the features in the Harvard Business Review article interesting and useful leaders in the sector are not fully supportive of most of its key features. Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky argue:
Our interviewees clearly valued analytical problem solving, crisp decision making and particularly the articulation of clear direction. The believed in strategic planning and overall direction whereas Heifetz (et al) argue for a very different approach which involves diffused micro-adaptations throughout the organisation. Similarly although an increasing number of the case studies were talking about and in some cases distributing leadership, mainly to departmental heads, there was little distribution beyond this middle level of the institutions hierarchy. Heifetz (et al) argue that the process of distributing leadership needs to be wider and deeper.

‘You need to mobilise everyone to generate solutions by increasing the information flow that allows people across the organisation to make independent decisions and share the lessons they learn from innovation efforts.’

(Heifetz et al, 2009)

Rather than widening leadership, apart from empowering middle management, the current crisis seems to be consolidating leadership at the highest levels in adult learning organisations. Although many leaders were interested in more radical patterns of leadership practice there was little evidence that this went beyond discussion and experimentation seemed to be being retarded rather than being encouraged. The Harvard Business Review article is a theoretical construct drawing on a number of examples, primarily from the private sector in the USA and undoubtedly public sector leadership in the UK operates in a very different environment in terms of control, regulation and external policy direction.

Many of the interviewees commented that they had valued the opportunity to reflect on and discuss their leadership practices, something that was ‘a bit of a luxury’ in their day to day lives. The process of the research itself had clarified some of their thinking and practice. Although some rejected the theoretical model put forward by Heifetz (et al), many nonetheless felt that it does offer one particular template for dealing with ‘ongoing crisis’ and

‘The skills that enabled most executives to reach their positions of command analytical problem solving, crisp decision making, the articulation of clear direction – can get in the way of success. Although these skills will at times still be appropriate, the adaptive phrase of a crisis requires some new leadership practices.’

(Heifetz et al, 2009)
that adult learning leaders may need to consider its findings in more detail, particularly as so many of its features – fostering adaptation, creating and supporting courageous conversations, independent decision making, sharing outcomes from innovative activity – are rooted in the historical development of British Adult Learning.
References

F.E. Focus 26.2.1910 Changing creating chasm between staff, says study.


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