The continuing challenges of FE leadership

The number of applicants for the post of FE principal has declined considerably over the past five years. The Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) has undertaken research into effective leadership dynamics in FE colleges. Professor David Collinson, National Research Director for CEL at Lancaster University, looks at the factors contributing to this trend.

Interviews with 140 employees (from principal to lecturer) in seven post-16 organisations revealed a general perception that the job of principal was highly challenging and increasingly stressful. Employees repeatedly emphasised the extensive nature of the role as a primary reason for the reduction in applications for principal vacancies.

Viewing leadership as a dynamic and interactional process between ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’, the project explored how leadership is enacted, distributed and experienced at various hierarchical levels. The research found high staff motivation and dedication, a preferred leadership style based on consultation wherever possible, a widespread recognition that praise is a key staff motivator and a unanimous view about the vital importance of effective leadership. Equally, our findings revealed that colleges make important, but frequently underestimated contributions to the local economy. Their engagement with multiple internal and external communities constitutes an ongoing challenge for effective FE leadership.

The research also highlighted some of the contradictory effects of the audit culture that now pervades the sector. These external pressures significantly intensify uncertainty, stress and the volume of work generally. Principals argued that their increasingly diverse and pressured workload was now a significant barrier to senior and middle managers applying for principal posts.

Given principals’ increasing responsibilities, providing a systematic approach to career succession planning is of crucial importance. The research identified extremely able staff, particularly at head of department or divisional manager level, who demonstrated the ability to manage a variety of tasks in a highly competent manner whilst also contributing new ideas and creating systems that assisted the smooth running of their departments. Leadership succession planning should be combined with leadership development and certification programmes designed to identify and encourage talented staff at head of department or division level.

The research suggests that many incumbents and potential candidates considered the job of principal as embodying too many challenges rather than too few. An important effect of excessive audit cultures, inconsistent funding and multiple community engagements is a growing disinclination for qualified candidates to apply for principal vacancies. The job of principal cannot be viewed as routine or comfortable – it is both exciting and challenging.

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References