Exploring the Leadership Strengths of Inspirational Leaders in Further Education

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“It’s incredibly rewarding to see students go from having limited knowledge, to having career aspirations at the end of the course, and having fun along the way!”

FE Teacher
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Executive Summary

**Background:** Traditional leadership models for further education including the instructional leadership model, the transformational leadership model, the organisational learning model and the managerial leadership model are briefly introduced and reviewed. However, leaders in further education face an increasing array of challenges in a rapidly changing leadership context. As such, the current research was concerned with exploring the leadership strengths of inspirational leaders in further education.

**Method and Results:** A total of 20 leaders and 24 followers were interviewed. Thematic content analyses revealed substantial consistencies between the views provided by both leaders and followers as to what constituted their inspirational leadership, with the two most prominent themes being an absolute belief in the strengths and potential of each and every individual and the leader’s role in enabling people to realise these strengths, together with a consistently individualised focus and attention on people, in order to create the relationship and environment that would allow these strengths to be realised.

**Recommendations:** As such, the recommendations focus on the role of the leaders’ philosophy of people and their potential, and the leaders’ ability for strength-spotting and creating the conditions that enable people to realise their strengths – both hallmarks of strengths-based leadership in practice.
Introduction

There continues to be an increasing governmental drive to improve the standards of student achievement in the UK, and educational leadership has been placed at the heart of this agenda. The Government’s commitment to ‘world class leadership in our schools and education service’ (DfEE, 1999) underpins, for example, the establishment of the National College for School Leadership. In addition, the incorporation of a Leadership and Governance strand in the Learning and Skills Development Agency’s Raising Quality and Achievement (RQA) Programme, further demonstrate the emphasis that the education sector has given to the development of educational leadership skills as being a factor in raising student achievement (Sawbridge, 2000). Clearly, leadership is held to be an important factor in achieving successful educational outcomes.

In the further education context specifically, four major models of leadership could be proposed. These four dominant models are the instructional leadership model (Greenfield, 1987), the transformational leadership model (Bass & Avolio, 1994), the organizational learning model (Argyris & Schon, 1978), and the managerial leadership model (Wright, 1996).

Instructional Leadership Model

The instructional leadership model follows the didactic nature of education, in that its focus is on the power of the head teacher and other senior leaders in the education environment. Instructional leadership theory posits that these leaders hold their positions by virtue of their knowledge, skills and experience, with this being derived from both their formal position within the school, and equally importantly, from their own teaching and educational expertise. As such, leadership in the instructional leadership model is defined through leaders having a better knowledge of education than their followers, and that it is through this thorough knowledge of teaching, learning and curriculum matters, that the leaders are able to support staff in improving their own practice, while also monitoring the quality and effectiveness of learning delivery (Greenfield, 1987; Martinez, 2000; Sawbridge, 2000).

In UK further education, this model has a good degree of resonance, since managers tend to move away from direct involvement with the curriculum as they take on more managerial responsibilities (Greenfield, 1987; Sawbridge, 2000). However, taking into consideration the changing role of leaders in education as a result of educational environmental changes and technological advancements, the instructional leadership model does appear to overemphasise the role of the head teacher. As such, it may not be considered a suitable model for effective leadership in the changing context of education, with society more generally moving towards more distributed and participative forms of leadership, which in turn de-emphasise traditional status and hierarchy, especially in the eyes of the emerging Generation Y (Twenge & Campbell, in press).
Transformational Leadership Model

In contrast to instructional leadership, the transformational leadership model (Bass & Avolio, 1994) is a leadership model that is much broader than just being an educational model. The transformational leadership model emphasises the importance of leadership behaviours which are often characterized as the ‘Four Is’ (Bass & Avolio, 1994). The first of these is idealised influence: the ability of the leader to gain the trust, respect and support of their followers. The second includes inspirational motivation: the ability to inspire and focus the attention of individuals on the achievement of shared goals. The third includes intellectual stimulation, a culture of questioning and challenge, where individuals are constantly encouraged to evaluate both their ways of working and the values of the organisation, including the leaders’ values. The fourth is individualised consideration, which is concerned with personal and individualised support that is available to individuals to allow them to develop in order to meet new goals and challenges (Sawbridge, 2000).

Again in sharp contrast to the instructional leadership model, the transformational leadership model emphasises empowerment, with the overriding concern of the leader being to create the right climate and supporting structures, in which individuals can achieve their personal and organisational goals (Sawbridge, 2000). In education, transformational leadership works very well as a means of more distributed and participative leadership. Where it is practised, individuals in any position of influence are encouraged to concentrate on building organisational vision and establishing organisational goals, to offer individualised support for both staff and students, to provide intellectual challenge and stimulation for both staff and students; themselves to role model best practice and organisational values; and to develop structures to foster participation in organisational decisions, which may include, for example, college councils or staff-student committees (Leithwood et al., 1999; Sawbridge, 2000). There is strong evidence to support the efficacy of transformational leadership in education where it exists, but this leadership style tends to be in its infancy in many further education colleges. However, the emergence of a variety of role “champions” is indicative of the fact that some leaders are making the transition to more distributed and participative forms of leadership that allow their colleagues to take part in and take responsibility for their own leadership in the educational organisation (Sawbridge, 2000).
Organizational Learning Model

The organizational learning model (Argote, 1999; Argyris & Schon, 1978), which is specific to educational institutions, proposes that the purpose of leadership is to build organisational capacity for learning, and thus the leader has three important roles to perform. As a designer, the leader’s role is to design the organisational learning process so that people are able to solve problems and achieve personal mastery. This requires new leadership behaviours such as coaching and mentoring, which enable people to learn. As a steward, the leader has a responsibility not only for developing a personal vision for the organisation, but to also ensure that the vision is congruent with the common aspirations of others working in the organisation. Finally, as a teacher, the leader’s role is not just about coaching and supporting individuals, but more importantly about the ability to see how the various parts of the organisation fit together and inter-relate, and how learning can be transferred across various sections or situations (Argote, 1999; Senge, 1990; Sawbridge, 2000).

As such, the organisational learning model blends elements of both instructional leadership, with its focus on the role of the leader as mentor and teacher, and transformational leadership, with its focus on the role of the leader as designer, enabling people to feel competent, and ensuring that people’s individual visions can be incorporated within and aligned to the wider organisational vision. The organisational learning model is clearly concerned with the process of learning, and pre-empts more recent work in organisational theory more generally, which is focused on the primary role of knowledge management in organisations, that is, on ensuring that the collective wisdom and experience of people is not lost when they leave the organisation, and also ensuring that one understands how decisions in one area impact on the organisation as a whole, themes popularised by Senge (1990).

Managerial Leadership Model

Finally, the managerial leadership model (Wright, 1996) is considered to be the most prevalent model of educational leadership in the UK (Sawbridge, 2000). The model is sometimes referred to as ‘transactional’ or ‘functional,’ in that it places an emphasis on teams and team working, where the leader’s primary responsibility is to balance the needs of the team, the task on which the team is engaged, and the individual needs of team members. The leadership role is strongly associated with the team leader, rather than any of the other team members, and as such there is an emphasis on individual leadership training and skills development, rather than any recognition or attention given to the development of wider distributed leadership capability across the organisation.
The Changing Context for Leadership in Further Education

The rapid and continuous rate of change in today’s society is having a fundamental effect on leadership and management in education (Hooper & Potter, 1997). Further, governmental initiatives have led to widespread pressures on leaders in further education. In a review by Simkins and Lumby (2002), these changes included globalisation, which is leading to an increasing pressure on educational institutions to ‘deliver’ the skills and attitudes required by the economy through greater participation and inclusion, at the same time as they are competing in a more global marketplace, both in attracting students from overseas and also competing with overseas educational institutions. There are also pressures on funding, leading to increasing demands to do more with less. The changing employment base is moving colleges to produce training standards to a higher level, which resemble that of the higher education sector, without any matched increase in resource to enable this. The demands for positive inclusion of a wider section of the population may also be causing tension with the increasing focus on developing higher level skills in people who may not traditionally have been part of the student pool for further education. Further, there is increasing challenge to the notion that professionals have the right to control their domain, with what to some appears to be ever increasing governmental and bureaucratic interference in their working and teaching practices (Simkins & Lumby, 2002).

Given this changing context for leadership in further education, it appears that the most pressing expectations of the course leader are rather more practical than those that might be associated with inspirational ‘educative leaders’. The role not only calls for ‘vision’ in an educational system, but also the completion of course related administrative tasks (Paterson, 1999).

Further Education Leadership in the Changing Context of Public Services Leadership

As wide and discombobulating as the changing context for further education leadership may appear, it is reflected more broadly in the changing context of public services leadership at large. Acknowledging this shift, Linley, Govindji and West (in press) advocated strengths-based leadership as a model for public services leadership that would enable public services leaders to address many of the challenges they faced. As leadership theories have evolved over the last decades, they have shifted from the idea of a single great person as a great leader, to recognising the demands of context, situation and contingency, to long lists of leadership competencies that all leaders apparently needed to possess, but never did. While all of these theories of leadership have merit, they equally all share some fairly fundamental limitations – foremost of which is that they tend to ignore the fact that different leaders lead differently, and yet a wide array of leaders are still successful, thereby seemingly debunking the idea that there is a core set of leadership skills, or personality traits, or situational requirements, that define leaders for all time and all circumstances.
**Authentic Leadership Model**

In contrast, modern views of leadership are more squarely premised around the idea of authenticity – that leaders lead most effectively when they are being themselves, and being true to themselves. Authentic leadership is about “being yourself – more – with skill” (Goffee & Jones, 2006). This modern focus on authentic leadership fits well with the positive psychology movement, and indeed, has in part been shaped through it (Luthans & Avolio, 2003), with more recent research answering the age-old question of whether leaders are born or made: the answer, it seems, is a little of both – leaders often have natural leadership qualities evident early on, which are then honed and developed over their lifespan (Avolio, Griffith, Wernsing, & Walumbwa, in press).

That said, there are also very likely to be common themes that emerge across any study of inspirational leadership. While, on one hand, from the perspective of strengths theory (e.g., everyone is good at some things and not so good at other things), we would not expect any given person to be great at everything, it is reasonable to expect that, across a given population of inspirational leaders, there would be consistent themes that emerged. Themes that may be characteristic of some leaders, while not others, but which still, in the round, indicate something of the elusive nature of inspirational leadership in further education. This is what we set out to explore in the current research, by asking a nominated sample of both leaders and followers, what it was about a nominated person in further education that made them an inspirational leader.
Research Methodology

Participants

A total of 40 inspirational leaders were nominated for inclusion in this research. Of these, 20 leaders in further education agreed to participate and were interviewed. All leaders were based in the UK. Eleven were females, and nine were male. An overview of the leaders’ roles revealed that four leaders were in senior management roles (whose roles included the development of training and subject material for further education); three leaders were Principals of further education institutions; and thirteen leaders were further education teachers / tutors, but were nominated as departmental or classroom leaders. The average length of service in a particular role was 15.1 years, ranging from two years to 35 years.

In addition, 24 ‘followers’, who were the nominators of each inspirational leader, also participated in interviews. Thirteen were female, and eleven were male. In examining the relationship that the followers had with their leaders, twelve were colleagues with the nominated leader; nine were students of the nominated leader; and three originally had a teacher-student relationship with the nominated leader, but now worked with them as a colleague. The average number of years that the follower had known their leader was 7 years, ranging from one year to 15 years.

Materials

An interview was developed for both leaders (see Appendix A) and followers (see Appendix B), based on a literature review of leadership in further education.

Design and Procedure

An invitation for nominations of inspirational leaders in further education from a wide network of people active in education in the UK and the USA was distributed via e-mail, which included an introduction to the purpose of the research being undertaken, and a request to outline the reasons for the nomination. The Delphi technique was the chosen methodology used for identifying inspirational leaders (Baltes, Staudinger, Maercker, & Smith, 1995).

Nominated inspirational leaders were then invited to participate in an interview in relation to the project ‘Exploring the Leadership Strengths of Inspirational Leaders in Further Education,’ funded by the Centre of Excellence in Leadership at Lancaster University Management School, where it was explained that they had been nominated as an inspirational leader in further education. Separately, the nominator, as a perceived follower of the leader, was also invited to participate in an interview, in order to explore the impact and climate of inspirational leadership. Once consent had been received, all participants were sent a copy of the questions that would guide
the discussion in advance of the interview, and were informed of the confidentiality of their responses, and that their comments would be used as part of the analysis, but would not be presented in any way that would make them identifiable to themselves.

The interviews were conducted via teleconference, which enabled the automatic recording of the interview to enable a thorough analysis, and lasted between thirty minutes to one hour. The interviews were analysed qualitatively using thematic content analysis (Smith, 1992), which enabled the identification and classification of themes of:

1) inspirational leadership in education,

2) educational leadership strengths, and

3) the development of educational leadership strengths to be clearly drawn out from the research interviews.
Research Findings

As noted above, all leaders and followers were interviewed qualitatively, and we report the key themes emerging from their responses for each of the questions we asked, presented separately in turn below.

**Leader Interviews**

1. **How well do you believe that you perform in your current role?**

   This was the only numerical response that we obtained from the study. Of the 20 leaders interviewed, their mean performance score was 8.2 on a 1 (poorly) to 10 (outstanding) scale, with 5 being “average.” Clearly, according to their own self-assessments, leaders indicated that they performed at a level of excellent quality.

2. **Do you enjoy your role? If so, what do you enjoy about it?**

   Leaders were unequivocal in that they enjoyed their role, with one leader even commenting:

   “I really enjoy working with people and with new ideas”.

   More typically, leaders responded with statements such as

   “I love the feeling that my job is really worthwhile. It’s the lives of people that I’m working with”.

   When leaders expanded on what it was that they enjoyed about their roles, their responses tended to cluster into one of three broad groupings. First, leaders talked most consistently about the “buzz” they got from seeing students succeed, and the great sense of pleasure that they derived from seeing people develop and flourish:

   “It’s incredibly rewarding to see students go from having limited knowledge, to having career aspirations at the end of the course, and having fun along the way!”

   They described how they found it worthwhile and meaningful to work with the students, engaging in dynamic communication with them and harnessing their different ideas and creativity as a means of realising their potential as they helped them to flourish.

   Second, leaders talked about how they themselves worked as part of a team, and valued having a core set of relationships with people who were just as passionate as them, demonstrating profound commitment and loyalty. They perceived their teams as “exceptional” and “a fundamental part of creating a positive learning experience for learners”.

In this way, they also enjoyed being able to give people credit for their effort, and being able to support the performance of their team.

Third, leaders enjoyed having the variety in their roles, and the autonomy to do things as they thought they needed to be done. For respondents who were not in very senior leadership positions, however, we uncovered a slight difference in this finding. Rather than talking about enjoying the autonomy of their roles, more junior leaders described enjoying having the courage to suggest ways of improving things or putting them right, where they saw ways to do so.

3. Why is your role important?

4. What do you see as the most important aspects of your role? [responses combined]

In responding to these questions, leaders distinguished between what they saw as their two primary populations of influence: students and teachers. With reference to their students, leaders were relentlessly focused on learner success, and would deploy a variety of strategies to ensure that they achieved this. These strategies included a strong emphasis on the leader’s own personal responsibility to know what their students needed to know in order to succeed, and then ensuring that they put in place realistic milestones for them to achieve it; an individualised focus on supporting learners through making time to discuss their personal development and ensuring that they celebrated success; giving learners self-belief and the ability to take charge of their own learning, which they saw more broadly as important life skills in and of themselves; understanding why it might be that a student has switched off from learning, and doing what was necessary to help them re-engage with the learning process; providing support for those who needed it, while also granting independence to students who were better equipped to cope on their own; and dealing with mistakes or poor behaviour through helping students to re-think what they were doing, and harnessing positive affirmation to encourage and enable them to believe that the student is capable of achieving.

Further, their concern for students notably went beyond teaching. Inspirational leaders in further education were deeply concerned about helping students to develop and grow as people, and equipping them for life more broadly, through helping them to be aware of themselves, their own principles, their own values and their own strengths. A comment by a tutor for English for Speakers of Other Languages illustrates this:

“It’s not just about teaching a language. Teaching goes beyond that. It’s about equipping the individual as a whole person. Learning English will help my learners integrate into their society, improve the quality of the relationships that they form, help them be involved with the schooling of their children, and apply for jobs to reinstate their autonomy and apply their intelligence, which is so often undermined due to their lack of communication skills.”
As such, inspirational leaders were clearly and consistently individualising their students, with a focus that went beyond pedagogy and extended into their lives in the broadest sense.

Inspirational leaders also saw their work with other teachers as a fundamentally important part of their role. They emphasised working hard in developing other teachers so that the teachers themselves can work with young people in flexible ways that develop learning into a creative experience for the students:

“Every learner needs to feel they can grow because intelligence and creativity are not fixed in any individual... the key is creating within the learner the knowledge and the belief that she or he can learn, can learn effectively, can make progress and be in charge of their own learning... they actually can make wise decisions/ creative decisions for themselves”.

They also emphasised showing teachers how to enable students to take ownership of their own learning, through demonstrating how to go about problem solving and involving students in the decision making. Throughout all of this, they tended to focus on enabling the teachers to enable their students to explore how they can learn and work creatively using their strengths.

In addition to these two major areas of focus, inspirational leaders also indicated other areas that they deemed to be important aspects of their role, all of which were more broadly concerned with enabling an optimal learning environment. These included controlling the budget, to ensure that they had a strategic handle on what they deemed to be priorities, in order to ensure that they happened; ensuring that relationships with people were functioning as they needed to, and that they did not walk away from problems that needed to be solved; and developing partnerships at all levels of the school and local community, including parents, teachers, support staff, governors, local council, and local people.

Further, inspirational leaders emphasised the need for humility, integrity and credibility, believing in what you do with all your heart, because these characteristics are then observed and appreciated by one’s students and peers. Captured in the words of a principal of a further education college,

“My strength lies in making others feel that I love what I do, so that in turn, they love what they do”. Other leaders typically responded with statements such as, “Be a master of your subject, as well as being inspired by it... it should be infectious!”

5. What do you most hope to achieve through your work?

Inspirational leaders were very consistent in what they hoped to achieve through their work. They typically spoke of a desire to enable students to realise their own value and worth, and to help them to identify the areas where they could make
their greatest contributions. Further, they themselves were squarely focused on collaborating with others, and on their contribution to a wider and engaged community.

6. What do you see as your key strengths?

The characteristics that inspirational leaders saw as their key strengths tended to cluster into three domains. First, they often talked of having a deep subject knowledge and bringing in ideas from other disciplines, both of which came from having an infectious passion for the subject specifically, or for a love of learning more generally. Second, inspirational leaders were consistently focused on students as individuals, identifying and playing to their strengths and weaknesses, focusing on their needs, motivation, anxieties, and successes, and above all using this to empower them to learn and to develop themselves as human beings. Third, the leaders described themselves as able to respond swiftly and effectively to environmental cues, and being positive and determined in the face of adversity, but never allowing them to perceive themselves as being better than others.

Throughout all of these descriptions, a consistent theme and focus emerged around inspirational leaders being motivated by an underlying drive to bring out the best in their students, and in turn to enable their students to contribute to a larger purpose in their own lives. One such teacher quoted that,

“Children do know what is exciting and what is interesting and what motivates them, don’t they?... The potential is already there and for me, the role of the teacher is to discover that potential, and a phrase I use often is ‘to find the gift in every child’. Maybe it’s a gift like a candle flame or maybe it’s a gift like a brilliant torch because we are different. But I firmly believe that every child does have a gift, or more than one gift.” Such views were driven intrinsically from deep within them.

7. What do you hope to be remembered for?

It was no surprise to find that the two key themes for which inspirational leaders would want to be remembered closely mirrored their descriptions of what were the important aspects of their role, what they enjoyed, and what they saw as their key strengths. First, they wanted to be remembered for having a passion for teaching and learning. Second, they wanted to be remembered for having helped people to see their inner growth and value, and to develop in the ways that were right for them.

8. Why do you do what you do?

Similarly, when asked why they do what they do, inspirational leaders talked about “finding the gift in every student.” They described how this gift was always different, but every student had a gift, and their role was to help their students to realise this gift and to harness it. Intriguingly, the same philosophy is painted on the wall of Eshe’s Learning Centre in Port of Spain, Trinidad: “All children are gifted, some open their presents later” (cited in Linley, 2008: 184).
9. Who or what has inspired you in your own work?

In trying to understand where these characteristics of inspirational leadership may have developed from, we asked leaders about who or what had inspired them in their work. Many leaders talked about overcoming hardship, either themselves or from witnessing others do so, and the impact that this had had upon them. Also, they talked about learning from the mistakes of others, or from more positive role models, including historical heroes, or directly from their parents, who instilled in them the value of learning, persistence and hard work. Inspirational leaders also talked about their passion as being what inspired them, whether that passion was for learning directly, or for the equality of wanting all people to be able to achieve, and seeing learning as a key vehicle for that to happen.

10. In your opinion, what is the single most important thing you do that makes you a good leader?

In phrasing this question, we deliberately used the term “good leader” rather than “inspirational leader,” out of concern that the humility we expected (and which leaders described above) would get in the way of the leaders answering this question in relation to themselves.

Unsurprisingly, the leaders’ responses reflected many of the themes that had been identified from their responses so far. First and foremost, they talked about being passionate and loving what they do, using this as a vehicle to communicate to their students that they valued them and believed in them, and showing an interest and appreciation of every single person as an individual, wanting them to develop and contribute through what it is that they have to offer.

They also described being conscientious and trying to develop new ways of working that put the love back into learning, as a means of keeping teachers engaged and keeping the increasing levels of administration manageable, so that teachers can do what they joined the profession to do – teach. One such teacher commented,

“What drives me is the communication between teachers and myself, and between pupils and teachers and myself. It is that great dynamic of helping teachers to articulate their visions and helping to articulate their strengths whilst acknowledge their weaknesses. It’s so important to empower them and put the love back into teaching.”

Throughout all of this, inspirational leaders talked about instilling the belief in everyone around them that everyone can make a difference in what they do, a motif that they saw as universal in its application to students’ lives, both within education and certainly much more broadly beyond it.
Follower Interviews

As well as interviewing inspirational leaders themselves, we were also interested to gain the perspective of the followers of these inspirational leaders, to understand what it was that they saw in the leader that had prompted them to nominate the person as an inspirational leader in further education. As such, we conducted short interviews with one or more followers of each of the inspirational leaders included in our study, asking them five questions as set out below.

1. What do you admire about person X?

One of the most consistent themes to emerge in relation to what followers admired in the inspirational leaders was the leaders’ capacity to individualise people. The followers described this in terms of the leaders’ ability to make a person feel like an individual through their use of feedback, body language, ability to listen intently and to demonstrate understanding by asking questions to clarify, strong but warm eye contact, and giving guidance that was right for an individual person. They also described leaders’ ability to find individuals’ strengths and to guide that individual so that they were able to develop what they did best, as well as the fact that they were able to see the potential in everyone:

“She builds personal relationships with people, showing a genuine concern and interest in the lives of other people - recognising their values and getting them to recognise what they are doing.”

Followers also described leaders being perceived as wise, with rich life experiences that they were willing to share, and using their personal experiences to share examples of their own mistakes and failings to help others. They were described as walking a few paces ahead of others, but enabling and ensuring that people can follow by communicating with them openly and working with resistance, rather than against it. Throughout all of this, leaders were described as displaying a vital balance between individualised care and also being straight talking and assertive, as the situation required.

2. What is person X doing when he / she is at their best?

When describing leaders as being at their best, the followers again talked about the leaders individualising and going the extra mile to nurture talent in people, including especially those people who may have been perceived as less able, thereby breaking down the stereotype and reinforcing their view that every individual has valuable strengths.

They did this through a coaching style of leadership, giving people honest feedback about their performance in a way that still always leaves the person feeling valued and understood through the process, while also managing any situation in a way that the person is encouraged to take ownership for their own behaviour, their own learning, and their own development, at the same time as demonstrating an absolutely positive belief in the individual, and in their capability to achieve something worthwhile.
“When giving feedback, she could often be very blunt... but drew out the best in people in a coaching way. She saw strengths and if you weren’t delivering your best she would tell you! She doesn’t just focus on the high-flyers either. She recognises that those at the lower end of the spectrum have special talents too.”

In describing how an inspirational leader managed misbehaviour, a follower commented:

“He is one of them, but knows the boundaries. He will be direct about people’s behaviour if necessary - but he prefers to guide them through the process of discovering what acceptable behaviour is - at an individual level. The learners end up wanting to behave for them, because they feel valued...”

Followers also described leaders’ ability to connect with people on several different levels, whether that was through their capacity for making meaningful connections with different people from different walks of life, or the connections they were able to make between vision and strategy, that is, what they were trying to achieve and how they were going about it. The leaders would also use stories and anecdotes to convey the points they were trying to make, and would leave a memorable and lasting impression with their words, so that people would be inclined to think about their meaning for a long time afterwards.

3. What do you see as his / her greatest strengths?

When asked about the leader’s greatest strengths, followers talked consistently about their ability to understand individuals, and to guide and motivate them in an individualising way that gave them the opportunity to do what they do best and do it well. They described leaders who would “get their hands dirty” by getting stuck in to what needed to be done, with this being another example of their humility, authenticity, and being at ease with themselves and who they were. Leaders demonstrated high levels of energy and commitment, which manifested themselves either through their animation and passion, and / or through their strength of character, persistence and “stickability.” Leaders were typically excellent communicators, and demonstrated humour, empathy, respect and flexibility, using all of these to build personal relationships with people that again enabled them to individualise and understand each person as an individual human being with a unique contribution to make.
4. Has person X had an impact on you in any way?

In terms of what the followers had themselves learned from the leaders, many of them described being inspired by the leaders’ enthusiasm and passion – almost to the point at which the subject matter itself was irrelevant, because what mattered far more was the learning experience as a whole. As such, these principles became much broader, and enabled followers to appreciate the value of enthusiasm, to be constructively critical of their own work, and to use ideas from everything that they had around them:

“I remember his enthusiasm even after twenty years of leaving college... he taught me the importance of, and satisfaction derived by, being enthusiastic about anything we pursue in life. The subject was almost irrelevant...”

As a result of this broader personal development, followers consistently described developing a greater belief and confidence in themselves and their abilities, finding a desire to go on and develop themselves further, and feeling that they were more generally equipped to face whatever challenges life may throw at them. Further, leaders were cited as being particularly adept at finding strengths and qualities in people that the person themselves did not recognise existed – which the leader did through listening, encouragement, and paying careful attention to any given individual’s unique strengths.

5. In your opinion, what is the single most important thing that X does that makes them an inspirational leader?

When asked to describe the single most important thing that the leaders did, the followers’ responses clustered into two important categories. First, the leaders’ belief in individuals and their ability to achieve, and their desire to unlock the talents of the people around them, was absolutely central. As one follower described it:

“Every class she taught was a level playing field - everyone could excel regardless of their talent - she could spot potential and know what to do to make sure they could deliver their maximum ability.”

Second, the leaders’ focus on making contributions that would help people to grow and enabling them to do so, with this being the central reason, focus, and purpose for why they did what they did, was critical. The leaders’ energy, enthusiasm, commitment and passion were often cited, but the bedrock underpinning these was their commitment to enabling people to become what they were capable of becoming, all of which linked back firmly to their individualised focus on individual people.
Conclusions and Recommendations

We set out on this journey of exploration into inspirational leadership in further education by exploring the current educational context for that leadership and suggesting how some of the ideas of the strengths approach could be applied to help leaders deliver the outcomes they needed to achieve. We found that the context for leadership in public services generally is changing, and that this context for leaders in further education is no different. People are being asked to do more with less, to build partnerships both more broadly and more deeply, to take on and execute a much wider repertoire of administrative and financial responsibilities, simultaneously with creating exceptional educational climates where individual students can flourish, develop and become the best that they are capable of becoming. Despite this, the leaders who were nominated for our study were clearly able to deliver these outcomes at the same time as they developed the people around them and the students for whom they were responsible.

The leaders themselves described consistently how they demonstrated their passion for education and learning, and how they sought to individualise the experience of every student with whom they interacted. Above everything, their interest was in the contribution that they could make to their students’ lives generally, and thereby to society more broadly, through enabling the students to flourish and grow into the people they were capable of becoming. Leaders consistently talked about the gift of every student, with their role being to identify, nurture and develop that gift, so that in time the students would internalise this for themselves and be helped to do the same for others. As such, the leaders ultimately saw their role as being the enablers of enablers, and their responsibility as being about developing the next generation of young adults so that they in their turn would go on and make a positive contribution to society. The descriptions provided by followers were very consistent with the themes that had been expressed by the leaders themselves.

Taking these findings together, a picture emerges of inspirational leaders who could be defined by reference to two fundamental characteristics, both of which are very resonant with the principles of strengths-based leadership that we introduced above. First, leaders were exceptional in their belief in people’s potential and possibility. Their starting point was that everyone had something that they could be good at, and they saw their role as being to identify and nurture that talent or strength in them. Second, and allied to this, leaders were exceptional strengthspotters – that is, people who had a natural ability themselves to identify strengths in others. As Muhammad Yunus described it: “Each of us has much more hidden inside us than we have had a chance to explore” (Yunus, 1999: xvii).
This is an apt description of the philosophy that underpins the attitude of the inspirational leaders studied here, and is further captured by the five fundamentals of the strengths approach as outlined by Linley (2008: 5):

1) The strengths approach focuses on what is right, what is working, and what is strong;

2) Strengths are part of our basic human nature, therefore every person in the world has strengths and deserves respect for their strengths;

3) Our areas of greatest potential are in the areas of our greatest strengths;

4) We succeed by fixing our weaknesses only when we are also making the most of our strengths;

5) Using our strengths is the smallest thing we can do to make the biggest difference.

Strengthspotting was a term introduced by Linley (2008: Ch. 4), which refers to the act of recognising and identifying the strengths that a person may possess, through a process of naturalistic observation in day-to-day settings, or through more formal assessment approaches, including psychometric strengths assessments and strengths-based interviewing. Ultimately, it is about looking for the telltale signs of a strength, which are indicative that a person has a natural propensity in a particular area. As identified in Linley (2008: 74-75), the telltale signs of a strength include the following:

- A real sense of energy and engagement when using the strength;
- Losing a sense of time because you are so engrossed and engaged in the activity;
- Very rapidly learning new information, activities, or approaches that are associated with the strength;
- A repeated pattern of successful performance when using the strength;
- Exemplary levels of performance when using the strength, especially performance that evokes the respect and admiration of others;
- Always seeming to get the tasks done that require using the strength;
- Prioritising tasks that require using the strength over tasks that do not;
- Feeling a yearning to use the strength, while also feeling drained if you have not had the opportunity to use it for a time;
- Being irrevocably drawn to do things that play to the strength – even when you feel tired, stressed, or disengaged.
The inspirational leaders we studied in this research seemed to do these things quite naturally. Our research parameters did not allow us to focus down more explicitly on the telltale signs that they were identifying in people, but the consistency of the language that they used to describe their processes lend confidence to the assumption that different leaders (and followers) were talking about consistently the same themes. Broader research in the identification of strengths (e.g., Linley, 2008) lends more specific parameters and pragmatic input to this, and also provides a basis for us in moving on to consider the recommendations that we are able to draw from our research findings.

The most consistent themes to emerge from our study of inspirational leaders were

(a) the philosophy of human development that they held, namely that everyone had talent and potential, and should be given the opportunity to realize that talent and potential, and

(b) the ability that they consistently possessed for recognizing, identifying, feeding back, and developing strengths in people.

This finding, allied with the shift that we proposed in an earlier article for strengths-based leadership in public services (Linley, Govindji, & West, in press), indicates that a key recommendation emerging from this research is for the selection and development of educational leaders around their philosophy of human development and their ability to identify, nurture and harness strengths in both their staff teams and their student populations. Ultimately, we see leaders as having a fundamental role as climate engineers (Naumann & Bennett, 2000), and equipping them with the tools and the ability to create an educational and leadership climate that is focused on realising the strengths of the people in their institutions offers the promise of a powerful new educational model for the 21st century.

We further suggest that this approach would be consistent with the needs, expectations and aspirations of the emerging Generation Y, who, by definition, constitute the current and future generations of students, and indeed future education staff and leaders, who will populate further education in the years ahead. As such, working towards creating further education institutions that are organised on the principles of strengths-based organisation, and that create environments for the realization of student strengths, would offer the triple benefit of

(a) meeting the challenges of further education in public service through harnessing strengths-based leadership (Linley, Govindji, & West, in press);

(b) creating a working environment that harnesses the strengths of the staff team, in keeping with modern approaches to organisation (Linley & Page, 2007); and

(c) creating an educational environment that identifies, develops and harnesses the strengths of the student population – an approach that has already been deployed extremely successfully with primary school populations (Fox Eades, 2008), and which holds commensurate promise for further education generally.
References


Appendix A:

Interview Questions for Nominated Inspirational Leaders

**Demographic Questions:**

1. Could you briefly describe your current role?
2. For how long have you been in this role?
3. How well do you believe that you perform in your current role? (Please use the scale below)

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4. Do you enjoy your role? If so, what do you enjoy about it?
5. Why is your role important?
6. What do you see as the most important aspects of your role?
7. What do you most hope to achieve through your work?
8. What do you see as your key strengths?
9. What do you hope to be remembered for?
10. Why do you do what you do?
11. Who or what has inspired you in your own work?
12. In your opinion, what is the single most important thing you do that makes you a good leader?
Appendix B:

Interview Questions for Nominees/Followers

**Demographic Questions:**

i) How do you know person X?

ii) For how long have you known them?

1) What do you admire about person X?

2) What is person X doing when he / she is at their best?

3) What do you see as his / her greatest strengths?

4) Has person X had an impact on you in any way?

5) In your opinion, what is the single most important thing that X does that makes them an inspirational leader?
This is one of a series of research reports carried out for the Centre for Excellence in Leadership. If you have any enquiries regarding this report, please contact:

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We recognise that there are many innovative and effective leaders and leadership practices in the Sector that warrant investigation, analysis and wider dissemination of best practice. We would like to engage with existing networks within the Sector and develop a wider practice-led research community contributing to current debates on leadership and other related issues.

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