"Good is the enemy of Great."
(Collins 2001:1)
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Leading Quality Improvement

Editorial Introduction, Professor David Collinson

Introduction

“If you can't say what quality is, how do you know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists? If no one knows what it is, then for all practical purposes it doesn't exist at all. But for all practical purposes it really does exist....What the hell is quality?”

(Parig in “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance”, 1974: 178)

This collection of CEL research reports examines leadership and quality improvement. It is the third in a series of volumes designed to showcase research produced by “practitioners” in the UK learning and skills sector (LSS) on important leadership-related themes. Quality improvement is a primary concern for policy-makers in the sector.

Building on earlier studies of leading quality improvement published in the first collection of CEL practitioner research papers (Collinson 2007a), this volume highlights a number of important policy implications for the sector, for CEL and for leadership both in theory and practice.

There has been some debate about whether “quality improvement” is a leadership or an organizational issue. This volume starts from the premise that quality is both an organizational and leadership concern. By examining the conditions, processes and consequences of leading quality improvement initiatives, the six research reports in this volume demonstrate the importance of effective leadership in facilitating quality improvement and achieving sustainable organizational change. They disclose some of the strengths and some of the pitfalls of contemporary quality improvement programmes. The first section of the volume contains three reports that seek to identify key success criteria for colleges evaluated as “outstanding”, whilst the second section explores three reports that address important quality improvement initiatives from the perspective of leading organizational change.

The CEL Practitioner Research Programme

The CEL practitioner research programme enables practising leaders and managers in the sector to undertake research on highly relevant issues. It is the result of a personal initiative by the chief executive of CEL, Lynne Sedgmore, who was keen to encourage a community of “practitioner scholars” and to provide an opportunity for practising leaders and managers in the sector to undertake research on highly relevant issues. In the summer of 2006, the Lancaster research team launched phase three of the CEL practitioner research programme with a nation-wide tender process. This tender attracted an enormous response, thus illustrating the very strong appetite across the LSS to conduct research by the sector, on the sector and for the sector. From the 90 plus submissions, the evaluation panel selected 29 practitioner research projects (as well as 5 HE projects) and these were funded for the period, October 2006 to March 2007. The six reports published in this volume are drawn from this round of commissioning.

Research is central to CEL’s organisational mission. Concerned to enhance the inter-relationships between research, policy and practice, CEL seeks to increase the impact of research on leadership development and on sector policies and practices. Research impact can occur in numerous ways. By broadening the knowledge base of the sector, research can inform policy construction and implementation. The findings of research may change organizational structures, cultures, resourcing or delivery. More subtly, they might lead to changes in understandings, attitudes or practices (Nutley et al 2003). Hence in many ways, research provides evidence-based knowledge that is useful and usable for those in the LSS.

A distinctive feature of the CEL practitioner programme is that those working in leadership and management roles within the sector conducted the research themselves. Research in FE and the LSS more broadly is still very much in its infancy. This research programme and the series of edited volumes emerging from it enable employees in the sector to develop a research “voice”, to participate in the setting of research agendas and to define the key themes for leadership. In doing so, practitioners are actively engaged as researchers in the process of knowledge production. During the six-month period of the 2006-07 research programme, two workshops were organised at Lancaster (one in November, one in February) to provide support, advice and guidance to all the researchers in undertaking the research, in analysing the data, and in writing-up the final reports. This process of strengthening a research community in the LSS by encouraging “practitioners” to become researchers constitutes a very important objective of the CEL research programme.

CEL created the practitioner programme with the intention that research can positively influence the sector and inform CEL’s teaching programmes. Equally, research engagement itself can constitute a learning experience, enhancing organisations and researchers’ own understandings and practices. The programme is therefore designed to foster the research-based skills and expertise of staff in the sector. By so doing, it seeks to encourage the “research-engaged college”: a way of empowering staff and students through enhanced learning cultures to incorporate a virtuous circle of enquiry, critique and improvement into well-planned organizational and personal development.1 This increased focus on research-based knowledge and experience is particularly relevant at the current time, as the UK government is keen for FE colleges to offer more degree-level/HE programmes.

1 It is increasingly common to highlight the “research-engaged school” (Handscomb and Macleod 2002) which refers to schools that investigate key issues in teaching and learning, use enquiry for staff development, turn data and experience into knowledge and promote learning communities (Sharp et al 2006).
Underpinning this CEL practitioner research programme is also the view that theory and practice are both very important and often mutually-reinforcing. Much of the debate about research impact focuses on the importance of “evidence-based” perspectives, but sophisticated empirical research should also be theoretically informed. Explicitly or implicitly, theoretical perspectives inform all research (Giddens 1979). For example, in the area of leadership studies many theories concentrate on leaders themselves and the qualities and behaviours deemed necessary to be an “effective” leader. Meindl et al (1985) criticised such leader-centric assumptions which tend to “romanticize leaders” by developing overly exaggerated views of what they, as individuals, are able to achieve. In contrast with mainstream approaches, post-heroic theories start from a different assumption, that leadership can occur at various hierarchical levels and is best understood as an inherently social, collaborative and interdependent process. Suffice it to say here, that theory and practice are best viewed as highly inter-related and the CEL research programme seeks to encourage mutually-reinforcing relationships between theory, development, policy and practice.

Key Research Messages

Notions of “quality”, “quality improvement”, “quality assurance”, “excellence” and “worldclass standards” are now widely used (and frequently inter-changeable) terms, particularly in the UK public sector. In the LSS, for example, the LSC has recently produced a “Framework for Excellence”. The QAA has published “Pursuing Excellence: An Outline Improvement Strategy for Consultation” and offers “The Excellence Gateway”, an online service for the post-16 learning and skills workforce. A “National Council for Educational Excellence” has also been recently created and quality assurance frameworks now characterise many college practices.

These “positive” discourses on quality and excellence illustrate policy-makers’ primary concern to encourage continuous improvement. Such messages by leaders are also often a means to motivate staff, eliminate inefficiencies, and offer students greater choice. Yet, within contemporary organizations generally and the UK education sector more specifically the meaning of these terms is not always clear. Indeed, there has been a noticeable tendency for semantic inflation among such terms, sometimes reflecting an overriding concern with image and reputation. Claims to offer “world class excellence” are frequently made but not always substantiated. For quality improvement to be sustainable, however, such claims need to be enacted in organizational practices.

In order to try to specify the meaning of quality and excellence in the LSS, prescriptive models have been produced, against which organizations can be audited and evaluated. Whilst these evaluation processes try to specify the meaning of quality, sometimes in minute detail, they also raise other important questions. For example; if excellence is defined in terms of compliance with pre-determined criteria, what space is left for innovation, creativity and diversity in education? Can excellence really be achieved through externally-defined processes that appear to demand compliance? Is it possible for such standardised models to take into account the specific characteristics and contexts of individual colleges? In certain cases, mechanised models of prescribed excellence may have the paradoxical and unintended effect of nurturing conformity, which in turn could actually constitute a barrier to creativity, innovation and diversity.

Equally, many research studies have emphasised that, if change programmes do not secure employee “buy-in”, they are less likely to generate staff’s full commitment and may even result in resistance (Uemura et al 1994). When employees perceive new initiatives to be imposed upon them, they are much more likely to engage in oppositional practices, especially if they feel that their own views are being ignored or dismissed (Collinson 2003). Employee oppositional practices can take many subtle and disguised as well as overt forms. Studies suggest that where followers detect discrepancies between leaders’ policies, discourses or practices, they can become increasingly cynical and disaffected (Fleming 2005).

Against this background, Section A of the volume comprises three research reports, all of which seek to specify some of the key features in leading quality improvement in FE colleges. These reports all take as their starting point the influential research by Collins (2001) on how and why some (private sector US) organizations move from good to great. Collins and his 20 researchers focused on a 30-year performance span of 1435 companies from the Fortune 500 list (1965-1995). Their extensive analyses found that only eleven companies out of the initial sample underwent the good-to-great transformation. Of the seven features they identified as being common to these eleven “great” companies, one of the most influential is what Collins termed, a “Level 5 leader”. Such leaders possess an unusual blend of qualities. On the one hand, they show ferocious resolve and fearlessness, but on the other, they are unpretentiousness, modest, shy and humble. While Collins’ study confirms that no leader can do it alone, his findings also suggest the importance of (level 5) leaders in building effective and sustainable organizations.

The first three reports in this volume explore senior managers’ views about why their colleges have achieved excellent ratings. In the first report, Gill Alton, Biddy Rowe, Amanda Rudolph and Paul Smith (The Grimbus Institute of Further and Higher Education) consider the leadership and management strategies used by FE colleges in becoming excellent. Their findings highlight the following “major factors”: staff have a clear understanding that continuous improvement is everyone’s responsibility; there is an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust; timely data monitoring is embedded; and there are effective communication processes about action-planning, setting targets, monitoring performance, and good practice. Of particular importance, research respondents in all the participating colleges emphasised the crucial role of middle managers in promoting quality improvement. Alton et al assert that raising the profile of middle leaders is possibly the most important factor in quality improvement.

2 The recent creation of The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills has further flagged up the contemporary importance of innovation for the UK economy.
In the second report, Tony Jowitt and Jill Westerman (Northern College) also seek to identify a number of common factors in "outstanding" FE colleges. They point to a clear and simple mission to which all subscribe: a clear commitment to improving quality with the learner at the centre of the process; having "the right people on the bus"; a strong sense of values in personal and corporate behaviour; a clear understanding of the roles of governors, senior managers and managers; and the critical importance of data to improve performance. Each college displayed differences in how these factors were applied, particularly in terms of leadership styles, management systems and the locus of authority and innovation.

The final report in Section A by David Vasse (Alton College) examines whether six outstanding FE colleges can be seen as "learning organisations". While his research found that some organisations demonstrate a greater commitment to employee involvement than is evident in "satisfactory" colleges, he also concludes that not all "outstanding" colleges are learning organisations, even though they are high-performing. In some cases leaders did not proactively create learning opportunities for staff. Although the views of people were valued, the power to make decisions resides predominantly with the Principal and the SMT, and this can restrict innovation, experimentation, learning and risk-taking. Vasse highlights a dilemma for leaders between empowerment and control, between a positive approach to learning and "letting go" of decision-making.

The research reports in Section B examine quality improvement from the perspective of organizational change. Norman Borrett (Bradford College) considers how FE leaders can harness e-learning during a period of significant change. His research found that, at a pedagogical level, the leadership styles driving change are a mixture of facilitative, distributed and empowered leadership. At executive level, command and control styles of leadership were deployed with respect to questions of e-learning infrastructure, policy and resources (thus supporting some of Vasse's findings). Borrett concludes that a complex mix of leadership styles exists in the case study college, ranging from managerialist, to facilitative, distributed and empowered (see also Jowitt and Westerman, this volume).

In the next report, Pauline Paret and Michelle Lomax (Bury College) argue that effective leadership can enhance a college's employer engagement. They highlight the requirement for continuous innovation and development, with specific focus on responsive and fluid structures and systems. The authors emphasise the critical role of people management with the utilisation of high performance working practices, enhancing conditions for high employee commitment and the endorsement of talent management to attract, retain and utilise the skills and knowledge of the workforce.

The final report by Ian Hunter (Gateshead Skills for Life Partnership) and Simon Penhall (Helmpark Ltd) points to the importance of partnerships as a key element of quality improvement. They consider the value of a "theory of change" approach to pursuing excellence through partnership and collaborative leadership. Their research suggests that more effective collaborative leadership can be achieved by undertaking a theory of change approach to strategic planning as it empowers partner representatives to commit resources to the achievement of a shared long-term goal. Hunter and Penhall conclude that a theory of change approach supported partnerships in becoming more strategic. Interestingly, like Alton et al, they also found quite divergent views on the meaning of "quality".

Together, these CEL practitioner research reports highlight a number of key messages for leading quality improvement and organizational change in the sector. They demonstrate the importance of communication, consultation, clarity and shared understanding as preconditions for the effective implementation of quality improvement. Achieving employee buy-in to the change programme is particularly important. The reports also demonstrate the multiplicity of possible leadership approaches and how their effectiveness is often contingent on context. These findings link closely with earlier CEL research on "blended leadership" and follow the views about what constitutes effective leadership (Collinson and Collinson 2005).

The reports published in this volume are also highly inter-connected with other key leadership-related themes. For example, Alton et al found that enhancing the development and profile of middle managers was possibly the most important success factor in quality improvement (see also Borrett in this collection). This finding is very compatible with many of the practitioner reports published in "Developing Middle Leaders", Volume 2 of the CEL Practitioner Programme (Collinson 2007a). Alton et al also emphasise the positive impact of learner voice on quality improvement, and this message links closely with those in 'Leadership and the Learner Voice', another recently published CEL volume of practitioner reports (Collinson 2007a). The research by Paret and Lomax echoes many of Kelly's (2007) conclusions on employer engagement in FE. Similarly, the findings of Hunter and Penhall, which focus on quality improvement through partnership, support many of those in Jameson's (2007) HE report on collaborative leadership and in the CEL practitioner volume on "Collaborative Leadership" (Collinson 2007a).
In many different ways, all the research reports published in this CEL practitioner research series focus on key aspects of quality improvement through effective leadership. So, for example, in the volume on “Collaborative Leadership” (Collinson 2007d), Gardiner et al describe the impact of new study centres on quality improvement, as measured through student retention, achievement and progression. They therefore reveal how collaborative leadership can enhance quality improvement. Similarly, in the volume “Leadership and The Learner Voice” (Collinson 2007c), Forrest et al examine the impact of the learner voice on quality improvement, whilst Bate and Sutton explore how the learner voice can help to tackle the educational underachievement of ethnic groups. Hence, all the CEL research reports feed into an overarching concern with leadership and quality improvement, defined in the broadest possible ways.

In editing this particular volume, the original research reports have been condensed to enhance the overall integration and cohesion of the collection. Some of the original reports included extensive reviews, for example of the leadership literature and recent government policy documents, as well as presenting more detailed accounts of research methodologies and findings. In the interests of space, these sections have been edited down, most appendices have been removed and every report has been structured using a standard format.

References


Executive Summary

This project explores the leadership and management strategies used by some FE colleges in striving for “excellence”, what the critical success factors might be which underpin this concept, and whether it is possible to create a framework for institutions to use in order to move “from good to great”. The findings confirm that issues of culture and values are at the centre of new strategies being introduced in the drive to improve colleges. In addition, there are strong indications that organisations have applied a greater rigour to data analysis in an effort to ensure that practice is embedded into day-to-day practice and in addressing poor performance. Colleges also describe the crucial role of staff in middle management roles, such as curriculum and course leaders, in creating an environment where colleges can move “from good to great”, and the research findings outline strategies which colleges employ to raise the profile of middle managers. The findings do not reveal any agreed definition of “excellence”, and whilst the research identified some clear suggestions about strategies to achieve “greatness”, perhaps the challenge for all colleges is to define their own concept of excellence in the hope that others will agree!

Introduction

This project set out to determine what leadership and management strategies some FE colleges use to strive for “excellence”, what the critical success factors might be which underpin this concept, and whether it is possible to create a framework for institutions to use in order to move “from good to great”. Following the identification of a number of colleges that had recently achieved at least an overall “Good” grade in Office for Standards in Education (OfSied) inspections, and utilising a range of data collection methods, responses were analysed to look for common or indeed “eccentric”, approaches to quality improvement which could then be shared widely with the sector.

Currently, OfSied inspections of colleges and other LSC-funded education and training organisations focus on how well institutions meet the (reasonable) expectations of learners, and how successful learners are in achieving their own objectives (assuming that they’re able to articulate clearly their needs beyond wanting to obtain a qualification). Government expects that all educational organisations, not least the FE colleges, should be engaged in a process of continuous improvement (i.e. they should never “coast”) so that institutions can and will play a full part in supporting Government in meeting its own expectations of the role of education and training in the 21st century. Hence, it is incumbent on colleges to develop good practice, and to seek out and utilise good practice seen elsewhere, in order to sustain a process of continuous improvement.
This project attempts to elicit what it is about some colleges that makes them feel able to demonstrate that they are able to move, or have moved, “from good to great”. It is hoped that this knowledge can be used by leaders and managers across the sector in the pursuit of excellence. Grimsby Institute of Further and Higher Education is currently working on a range of strategies to drive up quality and to ensure that it is prepared for short notice inspections. It is anticipated that the research findings will allow Grimsby Institute to use evidence from other institutions to compare strategies and identify common themes or original ideas which may be used to inform current and future practice. It is further anticipated that the research will also provide useful information for other colleges and educational establishments which might be used to drive up quality in their own organisations, providing real opportunities to share good practice across the sector.

The primary research questions were:

What are the key contributory factors which will result in success / failure to achieve excellence?

What strategies are being used to improve quality and achieve excellence, and how do these differ from those used to achieve previously good grades?

Who are the key drivers and how are they supported and monitored? How is progress towards target monitored? What are the costs in terms of training and time allocation?

Background to the research

There are over 400 FE colleges in England. Each college is unique, with its own history, community context, mission, and curriculum mix, and not least the range of learners who participate in the learning on offer (albeit increasingly colleges have less choice and control over learner intake, as Government policies change to reflect the perceived needs of the economy). Particularly since the incorporation of the further education college sector in 1990, and the development of external inspection processes, colleges have been expected to focus on “quality” and “quality improvement” and to demonstrate the “capacity to improve”.

The Government, through its statutory bodies such as the Department of Education and Skills (DESI) and OfSTED, has a concept of continuous improvement for educational organisations, and the notion that institutions, no matter how reportedly “good”, should not coast, but should strive to improve – hence “good to great”. Consequently, there has been a growth of interest from a number of agencies (such as the DESI, OfSTED, LSC, the QAA, and CEL and, not least, college staff), in determining what good quality means, how it can be identified, how good practice can be promulgated, and how (if at all) it can be applied in different settings.

Research Framework

The concept of management as a topic for study and research in FE has developed over the past 25 years. The range of published material on the topic has increased significantly, particularly since the incorporation of colleges in 1993. There has been a realisation in the sector that the approach to leadership and management is a key factor in taking any college from “good to great”, and many authors and research projects have considered what, if any underlying principles can be identified, which might then be taken up and applied by the sector as a whole.

This interest has been driven to a major extent by the need for colleges to demonstrate, through inspection especially, that the “quality of provision”, however measured, is good and improving. With a range of measures which inspectors use to grade colleges, the pursuit of excellence, and its judgement, at least in educational settings, then becomes eclectic. The concept is difficult to define – even a cursory glance at the indices of relevant literature will rarely elicit the word - and therefore it is difficult, if not impossible, for an organisation to determine at what point it becomes “excellent”, not least because it is likely that some other colleges will be doing some things better.

David Collins (2007: 102) proposes that all colleges, no matter what their reputation, “have patches of excellence, or demonstrate ideas of ways of working that are exceptional in the sector”. He suggests that it is the role of the leader to create a climate where,

“Everyone is proud of what they are achieving, but never complacent or satisfied and always feeling that they can do better.”

and that,

“Quality has to be part of everyone’s job, but managing it is a big job.” (Collins 2007: 105)

Jim Collins (2001) proposes that organisations only move from good to great if the people who work for those organisations are fully committed to the organisation and its vision:

“If we get the right people on the bus, the right people in the right seats, and the wrong people off the bus, then we’ll figure out how to take it somewhere great.” (Collins 2001: 41)

Although he writes from an industrial and commercial, and largely American, context, Collins believes that these principles can be applied universally, including in public sector educational settings, albeit with the caveat that getting people off and on the bus may be more difficult and time-consuming.
Managerial leadership, with the focus on skills, and the importance of balancing tasks with the needs of individuals.

Contingent leadership, where leaders adopt different styles to deal with different situations.

Organisational learning, which focuses on individuals’ abilities to transfer learning from one context to another.

The hypothesis here is that these leadership styles are discrete and therefore (readily) observed, and can also be codified in such a way that they can be learned and applied. This assumes therefore that approaches to management and leadership in the sector can be identified, and strategies and organisational tactics can be developed and adopted which will allow any college to move “from good to great”.

The issue of culture and values and their influence on quality has always been an important management consideration for colleges, and particularly so for the FE sector since incorporation which has led to significant growth and diversification. Arguing that the cultural aspects of an organisation may be equally significant to structure, O’Neil (in Bush et al 1997: 49) explains the potential conflict between structure and policies (which represent the formal goals and relationships of an organisation), and the values created by informal networks (which represent the practice and aspirations of individuals who work within the formal structure). Bush et al (1997: 48) highlights the likelihood of multiple cultures in large organisations:

“Our nature of structure may influence the culture of an organisation. Complex structures, such as those in secondary schools and colleges, may lead to multiple cultures whereas the typical simple primary school structure is more likely to lead to a single dominant culture.”

Whilst colleges have traditionally addressed issues of structure and policy there has been less emphasis placed on the identification and management of cultural issues. With the likelihood of multiple values and cultures within a large organisation, the importance of standardising practices and aspirations may be an important consideration in the drive to move from good to great.

Kyd et al (1998: 18) highlight the importance of organisational values which motivate staff and include issues such as trust, encouragement, appreciation and challenge.

“When the culture of an organization satisfies these particular needs people tend to work harder, with greater commitment and with a more purposeful sense of direction.”

and,

“Creating the culture which satisfies these needs is vital to the success of an organisation and the quality of its services.”

For an organisation to move from good to great requires leadership strategies which Grint (in Bennett et al 2003) states should be critically concerned with establishing and co-ordinating the relationships between four things – the who, what, how, and why:

Who – an (organisational) identity
What – a strategic vision
How – organisational tactics
Why – will followers want to embody the identity, pursue the vision, and adopt the tactics?

Jameson (2006: 28) proposes that a key factor in moving from good to great might be leadership situations characterised by:

“Strong value-driven missions and clarity of purpose that focuses on the learners, client groups, and staff served by the institution.”

These situations arise from teams working together led by people who have embraced certain ways of operating that mark out good leadership, and Alton et al (in Collinson 2007: 33) suggest that:

“Colleges need to ensure that staff feel valued and well-supported and that organisational strategies focus on...leading and managing in the interests of learners and staff.”

Beard (2007: 48) proposes that, “When it comes to change, it is said that there are three kinds of people: those who make it happen, those who let it happen, and those who wonder what happened.” She believes that where organisations once had the ‘luxury of changing strategic direction over years, this is no longer the case, and developing leaders’ ability to achieve rapid and consistent change is an increasing source of competitive advantage.

Sawbridge (2000) identifies several sorts of leadership styles seen in the sector:

The instructional leader, who operates on the basis of being an experienced practitioner.

The transformational leader, who leads through inspiration and the ability to gain trust and respect.

The moral leader, who offers an agreed set of values which underpin all decision-making.

The participative leader, who consults and therefore expects significant ownership and understanding by staff.
The experience of the researchers also played an important role in the identification of key questions and themes. Since Grimsby Institute is also involved in developing strategies which respond to the excellence agenda, the focus on management strategies grew out of an organisational interest and recognition of the key role this plays. Significant care was taken to ensure that the participating colleges were those which, both through OfStEd records, and other more anecdotal information, were clearly working on a programme of continuous improvement. A standard questionnaire, followed by more in-depth interviews, and triangulation where possible, is a common and well-grounded approach to research of this nature. Permission was sought to carry out the research from a senior member of the management team, or college principal from each organisation, including agreement to interview middle managers. Confidentiality of individuals and institutions was assured at this stage. The questionnaire and interview design took into account the need to avoid undue intrusion, for instance personal characteristics of colleagues, and interviews were conducted at times agreed by interviewees.

Research Findings

Data from eight colleges in the form of completed questionnaires and interview notes were analysed, and responses grouped according to the primary research questions originally proposed:

What are the key contributory factors which will result in success / failure to achieve excellence?

One college stated that its prime vision was to strive for world class standards, seeking to be in a position where it exceeded customer expectations, where staff worked collaboratively and where measurable factors would flow as a consequence, such as improvements in student attendance and retention.

Another college claimed that it never used the word “excellent” (the assumption being that this was not measurable in any real way, and therefore was not achievable). Most colleges commented on the importance to discern good practice, and by understanding that staff can be managed to be good, but have to want to be excellent.

Most colleges stressed the importance of the role of middle managers in moving from good to great, where managers at all levels work in an atmosphere of trust, integrity, and respect, and feel valued. The term “manager” being used in a broad sense to include curriculum leaders and team leaders. These terms of course do not have precise definitions, their use being dependant on individual college contexts and...
structures. There was also a widespread expectation that middle managers adopt the role of leader and possess the necessary skills and attributes to undertake this role, “Middle managers have a huge impact, greater than senior managers.” (College D)

“Team leaders are key to the ownership of the quality culture – they establish the expectation for excellence with their teams.” (College E)

What strategies are being used to improve quality and achieve excellence?

Responses from colleges fell largely into three categories, related to students, staff, and management practices.

Students

Having an overt and well-publicised policy of core values. A code of conduct was what several colleges believed to be a key to ensuring that students were more likely to achieve (and indeed staff able to effectively perform their roles) – such values included words like respect, trust, integrity, innovation, teamwork, responsibility, and celebration.

Early, fair and rigorous implementation of standards was identified as an important part of setting the code of conduct. Clear expectations of attendance, behaviour and submission of work were visibly promoted ... to the college ethos. From that date on, the students were nurtured and expected to be successful in their learning aim; a "tough but kind" approach.

One college also believed that the likelihood of success was related not just to providing excellent teaching and learning, but students also having to be motivated to succeed, and for this there needed to be a strong work and discipline ethic, i.e. there are perceived links between behaviour and success. In addition, the value of celebrating the success of students, including promoting success gained at a national level, was also considered important in raising local and regional awareness of quality, sustaining the morale of staff and students, and securing a sense of pride within the college. Colleges also mentioned the need for a high-quality tutorial system, run by well-trained and committed staff, as an important aspect of the student experience.

Staff

A significant issue which emerged from this research was the careful consideration and importance placed on developing organisational values to achieve a culture of excellence. This was recognised by several colleges as being a key difference in the drive to move from good to great. Staff spoke with enthusiasm and commitment about the new cultures which were emerging as a result of using the values as a means of achieving their goals, and even reported that some staff had left at the time when they were introduced because they did not feel able to buy into those values. Other

important factors covered by the values, and particularly appreciated by middle managers, were those which promoted team work; a sense of pride, and respect for and by other colleagues. One college reported that they had developed a code of conduct which underpinned the values and that working relationships and the general morale of staff had improved as a result of applying them to their everyday work. Another college commented on the importance of respect from colleagues, “We are proud that through our own internal inspection procedure it was recognised that we have an embedded culture of learning.” (College G).

Middle managers also recognised that the values were not intended to eliminate or restrict the unique identity, creativity or individuality of any department and several recognised that the standards had previously been implicit in some areas. However, they did recognise that principles had varied across different departments and that the introduction of a set of core values, which had been naturally adopted in some departments, had presented challenges and an expectation to improve and standardise in others.

“Moving from good to excellent requires a significant cultural change where good is not good enough … this needs a sense of urgency in implementing action and change.” (College A)

“The values have definitely changed the college – they have made working life more positive – they are just common sense really, and are values that you would expect everyone to have, but by defining and formally adopting them, there has been a significant change in the culture here.” (College B)

As well as having a set of values to work to, “passionate staff who care about students”, and a stable workforce, most colleges stated that they believed that one key to success in moving from good to great was in recognising the importance of the work of middle managers, however defined, and the work of teams who are given freedom, responsibility, and the resources and support to work effectively. Continuous professional development, the importance of effective communications, rewarding staff in a variety of ways, and not least “home-grown” staff (i.e. identifying potential future leaders from existing staff members, and developing their skills) rather than necessarily recruiting externally, are some of the ways in which colleges felt they could support teams and their leaders. Some colleges also mentioned the importance of staff mentors and “advanced practitioners” i.e. those tutors whose approaches to teaching and learning are identified as being of high quality and/or innovative in some way, and where these staff are expected to work with others to raise overall standards.

Management practices

The evidence that emerged from the research questions at all levels of the organisations surveyed was the clear direction, focus and drive towards a set of clearly defined goals and values. It was particularly notable that SMT members could discuss their vision, were clear about the strategies being implemented and understood the
operational implications of achieving them. One college stated that in order to move from good to great, there needed to be a sense of urgency in implementing action and change, and another highlighted the importance of having a senior management team that “listens, then acts”, and is systematic and consistent in the way that decisions are taken.

Several colleges stated that they intended to do “only what they are good at” (interestingly, in marked contrast to one of the criteria for the immediate post-incorporation inspection regime, when colleges were urged to grow the range of provision on offer, almost regardless of existing expertise, and in doing so they should learn from other colleges by “mixing with the best, benchmarking against the best, and sharing practice with the best”.

“Only do what you are good at. Be decisive – if you can’t improve the provision, remove it!” (College D)

“We do things our way, i.e. what we consider appropriate for this college…… rather than follow the crowd.” (College A)

One college stated that the role of its Human Resources team was changed to focus on supporting the provision of high-performing staff to ensure high quality service to learners, and associated with that, several colleges mentioned the necessity of becoming “tough and ruthless”, or “if you can’t improve, remove”. This applied to dealing with staff who were not performing to expectations, as well as closing courses that were perceived as weak (in terms of recruitment, retention or achievement).

Several colleges stated that challenging “non compliance” to the agreed set of values was part of the revised drive to move from good to great, and felt this had made a difference to the culture of the organisation and in turn their capacity to strive for excellence. Values introduced by one college included:

- Promote a positive culture of achievement by giving recognition for good performance and actively addressing marginal performance.
- Represent the College professionally internally and externally in image, behaviour and communication at all times.
- Actively support College policies.
- Challenge negativity in a way appropriate to the circumstances.

These values highlighted new drives to engender a change in expectations and standards, and were echoed by another college that had prioritised the training of all managers and governors in the understanding, meaning and enforcement of new “strategic priorities”, which as previously mentioned included: excellence, respect, trust, integrity, innovation, teamwork, responsibility and celebration. Senior and middle managers of one college also indicated that staff who were unwilling to buy into the values of the organisation had moved on.

The annual review of the portfolio of courses was used to prune courses where the performance had been poor. In one case where there were difficulties recruiting suitable staff to deliver a qualification, the college had decided to close the provision and pay for the students to travel to another provider. In line with Collins’ (2008) observations on the social sector, college managers were very focussed on what they could do well, and had the confidence to say “no, thank you” to resources and initiatives that would distract them from the main mission.

Two colleges had clearly used Collins’ (2006) concept of “building a pocket of greatness”. Using this concept, they had reviewed the curriculum areas and identified some that could move to Grade 1. Resources had then been specifically targeted at these areas, and had moved them forward. An unexpected spin-off had been that other areas also moved forward, almost as if it was a challenge to the complete organisation. Effective publicity and media awareness of this success increased the perceived attractiveness of the college in the process. Most colleges also believed that good quality internal communications (e.g. newsletters, staff meetings, the visibility of and accessibility to senior managers through regular “surgeries” etc) were a vital component in moving from good to great.

How do these strategies differ from those used to achieve previously good grades?

One college said that it had “changed” some managers, and two colleges had decided to rewrite their strategic plans and missions, as part of a process of restructuring, with the focus on excellence including improving success rates. Some colleges mentioned the need to ensure that each student is directed onto the right course in order to maximise the chances of success, for instance by having clear entry requirements and ensuring that staff apply these rigorously at enrolment.

One college stated that it had strengthened its quality improvement team by employing more quality managers – however, College C said that, rather than have a separate quality team, it had “operationalised” quality, so that it became everyone’s responsibility.

“Quality improvement has been ‘operationalised’ – it’s now driven as a bread-and-butter activity, as opposed to a process that occurs from the side through separate quality teams.” (College C)
Some colleges focused on quality by having more observations of teaching and learning, with targets for improvement. One college reported that it had established a team of 30 internal inspectors who were given some remission from teaching timetables and used this team to monitor compliance with quality procedures via in-house inspections. Some colleges reported that they had made significant changes to monitoring and managing the quality of curriculum provision, including regular course reviews followed by team meetings with senior managers, improvements to action-planning, including focusing effort on “weak” courses, action-planning for staff and students, a focus on student attendance and performance e.g. through the use of AUSIS (the A-Level information system), more sharing of good practice, an improved approach to tutorials, and key skills being delivered by a central team.

One college reported that course teams were well aware that courses would be discontinued if success rates fell below an agreed threshold and that they would be required to attend a formal meeting and present strong reasons if they felt the course should be retained. Another college reported that it had improved its systems for reviewing work-based learning, and one said that it had made significant improvements to some accommodation. However, despite the wide range of strategies introduced, one of the clearest common themes was the acceptance of rigorous data monitoring and the necessity to adopt a ruthless approach towards poor course performance.

Who are the key drivers and how are they supported and monitored?

As stated previously, it was clear that SMT members play an important role in sharing the vision and values of the organisation, however, the colleges seem to be aware that success is related particularly to the commitment and effectiveness of middle managers, and are increasingly recognising the importance of providing appropriate training for those who work directly with students, and for support staff.

Some colleges pointed to their strategies for developing middle managers through coaching and mentoring, and through ensuring that work is delegated so that staff develop their skills in this way. One college talked about the importance of “distributive leadership”, whilst another college stressed the importance of recruiting the “right” middle managers.

“We have strong managers at all levels, monitoring performance and acting on results.” (College F)

“We recognise that staff can be managed to be good, but they have to want to be excellent.” (College G)

In addition, one college stated how the “learner voice is given a high profile and used to identify and address quality issues” – in particular there is student representation on the college’s Quality Improvement Group.

“We are developing much more effective mechanisms for enabling the learner voice to be heard and acted on….as a key driver for improving quality.” (College C)

How is progress towards target monitored?

Most colleges commented on their use of action-planning and target-setting at all levels, and how they use a variety of means of monitoring achievement towards targets, e.g. through weekly performance reports, using software to monitor progress of the whole college action plan, by regular business reviews (“health checks”), or by the use of key performance indicators and a course review scorecard.

Data monitoring and identification of the early signs of vulnerability were also seen to be key to improving success rates. It was particularly notable that most colleges had developed a systematic and structured checking and monitoring system which operated at all levels of management, and that in several colleges this had become embedded in normal practice with a strong focus on management review and analysis as part of a quality monitoring process.

What are the costs in terms of training and time allocation?

Although one college does not have a separate “quality” budget, another college said that its commitment was around £275k each year and another stated that it spent between £40k and £80k each year to support continuous professional development. One college offered teams access to £25k each year to support quality and curriculum development projects.

“Systems and processes will only take you so far. Quality improvement needs ownership and pride in the work.” (College G)

One college said that its main identified cost of £30k each year was to cover the cost of observations of teaching and learning, and another college funded a half-time quality post in each department (with these individuals meeting together weekly).

Analysis of findings

Colleges who responded to the research appeared determined, through a variety of means, to improve quality (however measured) – the assumption being that ultimately such improvement would be demonstrated by increased student retention and achievement. What did not emerge from the responses was any particular consensus about the understanding of the concept of “good to great”, or any clear definition of “excellence”. Nevertheless, bearing in mind that information was gleaned from only a small sample of the 400 or so colleges in the sector, some key themes emerge about which strategies colleges have identified to help them move from good to great.

For students, it is important for them to be aware of the values system of the college, to feel well-supported (e.g. through good tutorial systems), and to have access to staff who are passionate about their work, in order to encourage improved retention and
Middle managers have many guises in the further education sector. In our research project the critical nature of this role was identified as the main success factor in colleges moving towards excellence, and feedback suggested there was an increased awareness of organisational reliance on this role and its influence on operational success. Colleges consequently recognised the need to identify individuals at all levels who are key to promoting quality improvement, and ensure they are trained, developed, and moved into positions where they are able to support organisations in moving from good to great.

Target setting and close monitoring of performance against national benchmarks was identified as the key means of measuring success, as was the use of and compliance with organisational policy and procedure. Middle managers are positions where they are able to support organisations in moving from good to great.

It was also evident from the research that the impact of culture was an increasingly important consideration in striving for excellence. Some colleges had therefore introduced a set of values to underpin the culture and, in particular, on the practice and aspirations of individuals’ work within the organisational structure.

In terms of expenditure there was widespread agreement that the cost of quality management had increased and that it had been essential to invest additional time and resources into training both teachers and middle managers who were seen as key to driving up quality.

The findings of this research would therefore suggest that the following key issues, in addition to standard quality procedures, can make a difference when striving for excellence:

- Rigorous and timely data monitoring systems which are embedded into day to day practice at all levels of an organisation.
- Dealing with poor performance of staff and courses.
- Acknowledgement that the culture of an organisation can make a difference and that compliance with an agreed set of core values is essential to underpin structure and achieve improved levels of success.
- Prioritisation of middle management training.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Colleges continue to improve and refine the variety of systems, procedures, and performance indicators which they have developed to monitor activity. This has been an on-going process for many years, hastened by the much more intense inspection regimes since incorporation in 1993, and the plethora of data, to which colleges have access for "benchmarking" purposes. Our research findings suggest that all colleges are seeking ways to achieve excellence and find ways of measuring that excellence. The research found no clear definition of how to define excellence and a variety of individual views on the range of indicators used to self evaluate. Student success levels of retention and achievement, as defined by the new inspection regime, emerged, not surprisingly, as the key driver.

Achievement. For college senior managers, the research found that the major factors in colleges moving from good to great are as follows:

- All staff have a clear vision of and understand that the commitment of the organisation to continuous improvement of the quality of provision is everyone’s responsibility, including the need to take prompt action to make changes following internal or external inspections.
- That the use of a clear set of values can make a significant difference to culture and morale, which in turn improves performance.
- Staff (and students) work in an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust, and integrity, where their efforts are valued.
- That timely data monitoring and analysis is embedded and becomes routine.
- The means by which middle managers (from both teaching and support areas) are identified, trained, developed, and supported so that they feel able to properly fulfil their roles is crucial.

All colleges involved with the research appeared to agree that this was possibly the most important factor in moving from good to great.

- There are effective and efficient systems and processes for communicating with staff, action-planning, setting targets, monitoring the performance of both staff and students (and managing the consequences where it is poor), and identifying and ensuring the sharing of good practice, especially in teaching and learning.
- Effective review of the portfolio of courses and rigorous pruning where performance is below that expected.

From the analysis of the data, it is possible for colleges to determine whether ideas can be gleaned and further developed into strategies which can be employed in the light of individual organisational contexts.
Further questions derived from the findings:

Towards a definition of “excellence” - what should this mean in the sector?

What impact does culture have on quality?

Can colleges become excellent by concentrating on those areas of provision that have high benchmarks, and withdrawing from those areas of learning associated with low benchmarks that, although successful, would pull down the headline data?

The views of learners, including the concept of learner motivation, and links between success and a strong work/discipline ethic.

The views of “front-line and support staff” on their contribution to moving from good to great.

Distributive leadership – what does it mean? How is it different from other models of leadership? How might it contribute to moving from good to great?

The role of support staff in moving from good to great.

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References


Good to Great: The Experience of FE Institutions

Tony Jowitt and Jill Westerman, Northern College

Executive Summary

This project explores how seven FE colleges and institutions have moved from “good to great” and achieved outstanding results over a period of time. The research suggests that all the institutions had a number of common key factors: a clear and simple mission to which all in the college subscribed; a clear commitment to improving quality with the learner at the centre of the quality process; having “the right people on the bus;”; a strong sense of values in personal and corporate behaviour; a clear understanding of the roles of governors, senior managers and managers; and a recognition of the critical importance of data and its use to improve performance.

Within these core strategies each college displayed differences in how they were applied, particularly in terms of management systems and the locus of authority and innovation. The report looks at the key leadership style in each institution and at the criteria for measuring success and the feasibility of adopting private sector success criteria. Highlighting the idea of leadership/management style associated with particular policy/funding cycles, it concludes that we may be moving from the individualistic FE leader (operating as the leader of independent institutions) to the FE leader as the “branch manager” of a naturally determined FE market.

Introduction

Since the passage of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, there has been a concern about the quality of the sector which has accelerated over recent years. Although overall quality, as measured by inspections, has markedly improved over recent years, the debate continues about raising the bar at the bottom end of the quality spectrum and about the development of role models at the top end of the spectrum. This project is focussed on the top end of the quality spectrum and emanated from the experience of the two researchers. Both work at an adult residential college which, in a FEFC inspection in 1998 and two AU inspections in 2003 and 2006, has consistently demonstrated good/outstanding practice. The last inspection in November 2006 led to the award of grade 1 (outstanding) in every area that was assessed. The two researchers, the Principal and a member of the SMT, wanted to evaluate how the College had maintained/improved its position over a decade, and, in particular, to evaluate the role of leadership in maintaining this position. At the same time, they recognised that this could best be achieved through a comparison with other institutions in the sector that had similarly displayed good/outstanding practice over a similar period.

Within the UK educational system, leadership has increasingly moved to the top of the political agenda. In particular, this has been the case within the FE sector, with the development of Beacon designation, the establishment of CEL and the introduction of an obligatory qualification for new principals. Equally, there has been an increasing volume of research in the field (e.g. Jameson 2006). As well as summing up the current position of leadership within post-compulsory education, Jameson provides in-depth interviews with ten current or recently retired “successful” leaders in the sector. Interestingly, she shows that there are common elements in their leadership activity but that each has a different primary emphasis distinguishing them from each other.

This project aimed to add to this growing area of knowledge and understanding. In particular, we wanted to explore whether there are key criteria which apply across the diversity of organisations within the sector. Second, it wanted to utilise the findings of a particular leadership theorist, Jim Collins, as a loose model for exploring leadership within the sector, and, in a world of increasing contestability and the utilisation of private sector criteria within the publicly funded services, whether private sector criteria could be useful in the development of leadership.

Research Framework

The researchers decided to utilise the work of Collins (2003) on “Good to Great” as a framework for the project. Its key features were identified as:

- Leadership that was humble and ferocious – Level 5 leadership.
- First who then what.
- Confront the brutal facts yet never lose faith.
- Focus on the one thing.
- A culture of discipline.
- Technology as an accelerator.
- The flywheel and the doom loop.

These criteria (examined in greater detail below) acted as a rough template on which we based a semi-structured questionnaire that we wanted to explore with leaders in the FE sector.
Research Methods

The researchers decided to undertake a qualitative study, involving an in-depth semi-structured interview with the principal or chief executive over approximately two hours. This model gave the opportunity to discuss and explore issues that emerged during the interview. It was felt that this method afforded the opportunity for a deeper and more effective response than might have been achieved with a questionnaire, although we recognise that this restricted the coverage of the sector. The research was time consuming and subject to the pressure of principals’ very full diaries. One interview was rescheduled three times and the research was difficult to undertake within the tight timescale offered by the CEL Project, particularly as the start was delayed due to the ALI inspection of the College in the late autumn of 2006.

The principals or chief executives of seven Beacon providers, in addition to Northern College, were approached to take part in the project. Each institution was asked to participate in a semi-structured interview about its leadership style, management systems, the criteria it used to measure success and other key elements responsible for its evaluation as an “outstanding institution”. One provider declined to participate. The remaining six were all interviewed by one of the two researchers, and the Northern College interview was conducted by one of the interviewers with the Principal. Five of these were general FE colleges, of varying size located in the North or the Midlands, and the remaining two were a small adult designated institution and an adult residential college. The choice of colleges in the North/Midlands did not reflect a geographical basis to success but was for ease of access and to surmount time difficulties.

In five cases the interview took place with the principal or chief executive, and in one provider with the principal, deputy principal and another senior manager. The two researchers undertook four and three interviews and consistency was maintained through the adoption of a set of 16 questions to structure the interview, as well as facilitating the review and writing up of the interior. The questions broadly corresponded to the criteria developed by Collins, as follows:

- What are the key criteria for good/great institutions in the FE sector?
- Did institutions demonstrate an upward shift in performance?
- Do institutions move from good to great?
- What are the key leadership/management factors associated with outstanding institutions?
- What are the key factors for measuring success?

Research Findings

College A

College A is a medium-sized general FE college in the North West. It has an annual turnover of £15 million and around 7000 learners. Operating on one site with an additional outreach centre, it is currently in discussions around merger with another local college.

Leadership Style and Management of Change

This was the only interview in which two other senior managers were interviewed alongside the Principal. Principal A has been in post for four years, having worked at the college previously for a number of years. During these four years there had been an upward shift in performance. When he came into post the College had a mission which was unfocussed “all things to all people”. He re-aligned the business to meet a clear agenda which has resulted in a new clarity of purpose and a change to the organisational culture. He knew where the College needed to be and organised activity around this central core.

He described himself as “More Richard Branson than civil servant”. There is a lack of bureaucracy in the college which means that the pace of change is very fast and as such it does not feel like the public sector. The SMIT is not minuted and work is not strictly divided by job role but by capability. He described the college as a mature and entrepreneurial organisation which developed organically and operated on trust.

Principal A attributes his success to the combination of himself in this particular college (which he knew well before taking the lead). In his view this is not necessarily a transferable model; he could not go into any fair to middling college and achieve such an upward shift in performance as he would not have the necessary empathy to achieve success. He defined the key factors which contributed to this increased performance as:

- Clarity of purpose.
- Communication and common understanding. People must understand what is expected of them.
- The “right people on the bus”. The organisation evolves around the talents of individuals. His strategy is to “grow your own” and allow people to expand their talent which he deliberately nurtures.
- Having the confidence and information to have difficult conversations in a transparent and non-threatening way. This is an organisation in which people will tell the truth and are not afraid to “get the elephant on the table”.

However applicable are private sector success criteria to the publicly funded further education sector?

All participants were assured that no individual or institution would be obviously identifiable.
Measuring Success

For Principal A the key criterion to measure success of an institution in the FE sector is the success rates. Student achievement is the key driver alongside the need to remain competitive and be sustainable in the future. He uses raw data benchmarks but otherwise is not interested in others, “The major retailers don’t worry about their competitors, they focus on being the best themselves”. However, he did say that the business always needed to re-align itself to meet economic demand and that principals fail when they do not see what is coming. For him, teaching and learning is what is important, what “we passionately care about”.

College B

College B is a large general FE college based in the Midlands. It has 30,000 students, five campuses and an annual turnover of £45 million. It has merged with two other colleges in recent years and is presently in discussion over merger with a third.

Leadership Style and Management of Change

Principal B has been in post for 10 years, but has been a Principal for 22 years having held the post at two previous colleges. For him, his college has coasted since its successful inspection in 2004, but is now revitalised and once again “on the up”.

Principal B identified the top five factors that have contributed to the College’s steady upward shift in performance as:

1. Getting the “right people on the bus”.
2. Clearly established mission and values.
3. Clearly enunciated emphasis on quality in the classroom as core business.
4. Carefully chosen partners.
5. Flexible response to change in the external environment.

Change has developed organically through a series of interventions rather than a master plan. For the first 18 months of his principalship his priority was to get “the house in order”. After this, there was a deliberate shift from “power and control” to “shaping purpose” and unlocking talent by encouraging distributed leadership throughout the college. He prefers to rely on self-regulation but sets a culture where people will “rinse the cottage cheese”, a metaphor he remembered from Good to Great which signifies an absolute attention to the smallest details and the necessary tenacity to solve problems. A key feature of this distributed leadership is to ensure that everyone understands the context of the college and focuses on the performance of the curriculum as a priority. At this point the Deputy Principal interrupted to say that this picture of shared leadership was only true to a point, and that the Principal did indeed lead from the front much more than he was acknowledging.

Principal A stated that he did not adopt a particular model of leadership, although he read widely around the subject and was very familiar with the model presented in Good to Great: he had the notion of a level five leader in his head; he was interested in human behaviour and used the AMO technique (Ability, Motivation and Opportunity) to engage staff. His focus was always on improvement.

He used Ashridge/CEL as external consultants to deliver a management development programme, but felt it was crucial that the college developed the programme itself with the aim of devolving leadership capacity. This involved contextualising the mission and vision and focussing on the stated corporate values beginning with a staff survey around values which revealed some gaps: the management programme emerged from these gaps and was organised around four project themes: Performance Management, Customer Service, Team Leader Role and Institutional Pride.

He had set a target of achieving Beacon status in five years, but this was achieved in three. He attributed this in part to the snowball effect of a clear articulation of values and aims, once this was clear, others followed. The new culture of excellence in performance emerged out of this mashing of clarity, communication and high standards.

He had adopted an open and accountable approach to HR management, using “soft” HR measures which he described as “planned spontaneity”. This involves giving staff recognition for their work and small rewards for long service, a party on retirement and access to a pre-retirement programme involving a slow reduction in working days. However he stressed that he could be tough when necessary; he had enforced the capability procedure more often than it had been previously and courses had been closed due to poor performance which caused ripples throughout the organisation. He described himself as ruthless when it came down to protecting students. Any necessary cuts had largely been managed through negotiation and voluntary packages. Where the necessary skill did not exist he readily intervened and felt that the college was a mature organisation which identified its own weaknesses. The focus on the recognition and reward of desired behaviours brought about change. When asked about technology as a driver he referred to the importance of data as key in terms of supporting the business to improve.

Measuring Success

For Principal A the key criterion to measure success of an institution in the FE sector is the success rates. Student achievement is the key driver alongside the need to remain competitive and be sustainable in the future. He uses raw data benchmarks but otherwise is not interested in others, “The major retailers don’t worry about their competitors, they focus on being the best themselves”. However, he did say that the business always needed to re-align itself to meet economic demand and that principals fail when they do not see what is coming. For him, teaching and learning is what is important, what “we passionately care about”.

College B

College B is a large general FE college based in the Midlands. It has 30,000 students, five campuses and an annual turnover of £45 million. It has merged with two other colleges in recent years and is presently in discussion over merger with a third.

Leadership Style and Management of Change

Principal B has been in post for 10 years, but has been a Principal for 22 years having held the post at two previous colleges. For him, his leadership style is adaptable; he could be a heroic leader or adopt distributed leadership as required; a stance he agreed could be described as situational leadership. He is very familiar with the work of Collins and had used “Good to Great” and “Built to Last” as the paradigm for change within the organisation. For him, reflection on practice is highly important. His view is that his college has coasted since its successful inspection in 2004, but is now revitalised and once again “on the up”.

Principal B identified the top five factors that have contributed to the College’s steady upward shift in performance as:

1. Getting the “right people on the bus”.
2. Clearly established mission and values.
3. Clearly enunciated emphasis on quality in the classroom as core business.
4. Carefully chosen partners.
5. Flexible response to change in the external environment.

The college is built around the core values of “Students First”, “Quality in all we do” and “Respect”. These have been in place for 25 years. There is a paradox in that the college is very bureaucratic and paper driven, an “old fashioned organisation” but is also flexible and innovative. “We all love FE”. Along with the rest of the college, he is passionate about FE and its learners. This has created an institution with its own identity; new staff either stay a short time and hate it, or are there for life. “You either fit or you don’t”. He recognised that this could lead to a kind of arrogance, but was tempered by a vibrant reactive atmosphere, a constant striving for success.
This passion for learners underlay his practice which involves actively building the reputation of the college, moving into priority areas and constantly balancing the needs of the business and of the learners. Staff and students are also leaders in the college: students as well as all staff are trained in lesson observation; this makes for good teachers.

His prime responsibility is to keep the business afloat and manage the budget using money from outside government sources to deploy resources and where necessary using the size of the college and its influence with funding bodies. It is important for Principal B that the governing body is strong and “honest arbiters of what is good for the learners”, well informed and not led by him. He sees his role as ensuring that the governors know what questions to ask. The governors set him targets, for example, around enhancing the college’s reputation with appearances in the national educational press. External people are “queuing up” to be board members, but they have to be clear about the line between governance and management before taking up the role. It is important that there is a climate of trust and openness where staff have open access to governors and vice versa.

He manages change through negotiation and persuasion as well as being transactional when the need arises. Ideally change is a bottom-up process which adds to the sustainability of the college. Although the two mergers have meant £1.5 million of structural staff changes he has never had to make any compulsory redundancies. However, he did refer to the need to “identify the subversives and get rid” whilst recognising the need to keep up esteem and to try not to let people leave “with a bad taste”. An external consultant was employed to plot climate improvement at the start of a major change process. The areas bringing about most improvement were then made a focus for activity and used as change accelerators.

Whilst the principal identified the use of MIS as a key way of driving improvements, he had seen MIS as a potential risk area and had actively head-hunted the best MIS officer in the region. He is not afraid of identifying people he wants for the college and going to get them.

**Measuring Success**

Principal B identified the key criteria to measure the success of an institution in the FE sector as success rates. Its place in league tables, a national and local reputation and making a contribution to local economic development through involvement with local companies. He has used the drive for continuous improvement to avoid the peaks and troughs which can emerge between external inspections. His aim is to have an open college with shared knowledge and corporate solutions. For him, successful leadership involves not being afraid to give bad news and engage in it with the governing body, but without assigning blame. He is alet to external opportunities, will restructure to take advantage of these, as well as keeping staff happy and motivated. Growing your own generation of up and coming leaders is important too.

He gives “lots of pats on the back” and part of not assigning blame is recognising that when things do go wrong in the college it is not from a lack of endeavour. Poor performance must be firstly identified, then the cause identified and fixed by support and help. He would always give someone support and a chance to improve but does remove under-performers. Principal B states that he analyses issues scientifically and uses the analogy of a biological antibody, whereby people cluster around a problem until it is absorbed and resolved. Indeed he has a vision of the college as an amoeboid organism, with a nucleus and surrounding fluid which is reactive to new opportunities.

He feels that the public sector can learn from some private sector quality improvement measures and gave as an example the Toyota model of the reverse customer journey: walking through the business and then going back to identify problem areas which are publicly acknowledged (on the wall in the car park)! The private sector can also have the advantage of being more feet of loot, particularly in the world of demand-led funding and contestability. He has lost out on contracts to private providers who have more flexibility in terms of staffing. He uses partnerships with business to move the culture of the staff and the organisation forward to avoid this in future.

**College C**

College C is a general FE college in the North West. It has around 8,000 students and an annual turnover of £24 million. The last 3 years have seen improved performance across all areas and levels from a high to achieving Beacon status. The Principal has been in post for two years and was previously Deputy Principal.

**Leadership Style and Management of Change**

Principal C defined the key factors that had contributed to this improved performance as:

- Clarity of goals. Simple and straightforward achievement goals are set for each area: firstly to achieve the benchmarks, then to aim for 5 points above benchmark and subsequently 10 above benchmark.
- Complete open knowledge of cross-college data. There is literally no hiding place for poor performance, communication and sharing knowledge is vital.
- A can-do team culture.
- Accountability.
Principal C described her leadership style as “distributed leadership”. Undertaking the CEL Senior Leadership Development Programme brought new self-reflection on the nature of her leadership; she describes herself very much as a reflector – on her role, the college, how to make things easier so that people are able to do a good job. For her thinking and planning are just as important as doing. She feels that there has been a shift in the leadership style needed by the FE sector. Immediately after incorporation, FE colleges assumed a large amount of autonomy and a number of “heroic” leaders emerged. Now she likens the principal’s role to that of “branch manager” and considers that this requires a different type of leader. The previous principal talked of “pinpointing on a pin head”, it now feels more like “pinpointing on a microchip”. We are in a different era where principals are not so much required to steer the ship as to respond to external directives, and this will increase over the next two years.

**Measuring Success**

She has two key criteria for success: the first is performance as measured by success rates. The second is around the college playing an active role within the community and on behalf of the community as key. This brings benefits to the college, “Nothing happens in C that we don’t know about”, but also is a marker of the civic responsibility bound up with being a large publicly funded body. For this reason, Principal C is cynical about the new focus on contestability and competition. She questions whether private training organisations have a similar accountability and community involvement. For her the need to make a profit is not reconcilable with this civic responsibility.

**College D**

College D is a medium sized college in the North West. It has an annual turnover of £18m and 8,000 learners. It has doubled in size since 1993 and has had three inspections in that period which have shown consistent improvement. It has had consistent growth in 16–19 year olds with a reduction in adult learners.

**Leadership Style and Management Change**

The Principal said that there had been a change in the nature of leadership over the period, with a movement from a more top-down approach to a more collaborative approach. Success on an ongoing basis was attributed to:

- Consistency in terms of objectives throughout the organisation.
- A strong sense of values in personal and corporate behaviour.
- Getting the “right people on board”, with a good balance between objectives and skills, and providing them with the financial and organisational freedom to pursue growth and quality improvement.

Principal C added that she expected high performance and quality in everything the college did, “like a stick of rock, wherever you cut there is quality”. She has high expectations of staff, interviewing each member of staff within the first 6 months of their appointment and encouraging people to go the extra mile that is needed for sustained outstanding performance.

Principal C said that she had worked to maintain the supportive egalitarian atmosphere created by her predecessor, but had observed that, over time, many people would try to get away with non-compliance when the effort needed felt too much. Previously there was no adequate system for checking and monitoring and she has instituted this, intervening directly by contacting teams and asking for meetings to explain under-performance. At the same time there is an atmosphere of vitality and ideas in the college and she focuses effort where it is most needed, so that, for example, the SMT only does things that will impact and make a difference, not wasting time on activities that do not.

Having the right people is important and Principal C described the college staff as “wonderful”. She encourages people to use their creativity within a framework; the teachers are the leaders of learning and she has seen examples of deep thinking around how to bring about improvements amongst the teaching staff. She feels that it is hard to reward staff adequately when pay levels are pre-set and promotion opportunities are few, but does what is possible to reward good performance by, for example, making more staff development funds or resources available to teams. The pay levels are set at or above AOC recommended rates. In a recent IP review a number of staff commented positively on the fact that the Principal often emails teams to thank them for their work, as do governors through letters.

She expressed the view that leadership is about judgement, and she described much of the activity in her life, both at work and beyond, as based upon her judgement and gut instinct. When she took up her post she made no immediate changes; it was no a “big bang” of change; she felt that the college had been subject to much external change and this was not what was required, but she did put things in place to mark her taking up the role. She identified the key difference as the previously discussed focus on performance and her careful scrutiny of absolutely everything. This focus has led to more disciplines and grievances than in previous years but also to enhanced performance. She is accessible and communicates regularly with staff via a termly “Principal’s Update” newsletter and a termly full staff meeting. For her personally taking up the principal’s role was relatively straightforward. As deputy she had frequently covered this role during the absence of the previous post-holder; the biggest shock was the assumption of overall responsibility: “the buck now stops here.”

In her leadership role she feels that she benefited from the new principal’s induction programme and the generosity of the course lead who shared procedures from his own college. Principal C also has a mentor who had the experience to support her during her first two years in post. She described her “drivers” as simple: giving everyone in the college a valuable experience and doing the best possible by staff and students. She has used technology to drive this improvement forward and is making improvements to ensure that it is accessible to all and easy to use. Challenges around performance are driven by data.
All staff, irrespective of contractual status have the same terms and conditions. Picking and choosing the developments to be followed rather than simply chasing money.

The college had a long term clear vision based on young adults and the college had consciously tried to create a young adult atmosphere. It had only entered 14–16 provision very slowly, ensuring that it did not distort the atmosphere. This clarity of purpose was held together by a strong leader, who acted as "the adhesive" that held elements together, retaining the strength of the overall structure.

The college hardly ever used consultants and had not consciously modelled itself on any other institution, however, it always looked to incorporate best practice from other organisations. To support this, all staff were expected to spend five days per year in other organisations. It had developed an “esprit de corps” through having all staff on the same conditions (including contract staff), with an annual bonus system and the provision of private health care. Significantly it was said that trade unions were very weak in the college and the implication was that there was little or nothing for staff to protest about. Turnover at senior levels was limited, but there was a significant turnover of heads of faculties who were seen as the crucial innovators and managers of the student experience. The Principal believed strongly that any college could be made outstanding, but felt there were serious leadership and management deficiencies throughout the sector, and that critical to its future was training in management skills.

The key features of the institution were: clarity of purpose, a stable SMT, a strong leader to hold all the elements together, the utilisation of quality control as the referee in conflictual situations, and the drive to continually improve the quality of provision. Interestingly, inspection was seen as a good external driver to assist college leaders and managers in the process of quality improvement.

Measuring Success

The key criteria for a successful institution in the FE sector were perceived to be:

The provision of a quality product, as reflected in student success rates, their destinations and the value the college added.

The existence of a happy workforce, operating within an improving environment and good resources.

The creation of a framework in which individuals could make what both the college and individuals saw as a real contribution.

Ongoing financial stability and profitability.

The college saw itself as an outstanding UK company in which “the flywheel was running automatically”. It was questioning whether it was a public sector organisation or a publicly funded body working towards privatisation and had utilised a theoretical management buyout as a way of developing policy. It was a medium sized college and wanted to remain so, operating within a context of a stable 16 – 19 base, an adequate catchment area and one of mixed industry.

College E

College E is a medium sized college in the North Midlands with an annual turnover of £30m and 28,000 learners. It is located on two campuses, the secondary one being the result of the absorption of a neighbouring failing college.

Leadership Style and Management Change

The Principal had been at the college since the 1980s in a variety of roles including vice principal. Over the last decade there had been an upward shift in performance which was attributed to:

An effective and long established quality assurance/quality improvement system which all staff understood, largely because of its longevity.

A highly centralised quality system with college policies applied in the same way across all areas – “benevolent Stalinism”.

Rigorous and very self-critical self-assessment.

The commitment of senior/middle managers to the mission of the college.

Massive improvements in collecting data and then utilising it to identify issues that needed addressing.

The Principal had developed a highly centralised organisational system, which “seriously disempowered” heads of departments in terms of policy and finance. Heads of departments were told to concentrate on products and people – in his words, “Apple model rather than an IBM model”. In addition, the Principal was involved in interviews for all members of staff, with a personal interview with each person after 6 months.

The core value that lay at the heart of the college was the idea of the civic college. However, this was threatened by the patterns of funding and the LSC. So in the last two years the college had grown by 33%, all in 16 – 19 year olds, and the decline in the adult budget and adult numbers were seen as being highly detrimental to the civic commitment of the college. The college is committed to continuing change but believes that change needs to be novel. Central to this is “management by flattery”. Financial rewards were not seen as important in this process, and indeed in some areas did not act as a carrot.
Measuring Success

The key criteria are learner attendance, retention, achievement and success. Data on this is captured weekly, monthly, termly and annually and constantly analysed. The second criteria is staff satisfaction, because it regularly review the mission of the Centre, and as a small institution, to respond flexibly and quickly to changing needs and requirements. The final factor is continually to ensure that governance and management are clearly separated and both sides understand their respective roles.

College G

College G is a residential adult education college in the north. It is one of the long-term colleges and has an annual turnover of £6 million, with around 6,000 students, most of whom are part-time. It has had a good inspection in 2003, after which it became an LSC Beacon and a further outstanding inspection at the end of 2006.

Leadership style and management of change

Principal G defined the five key factors that have contributed to the college's success as:

1. Commitment to a simple mission from staff, governors, stakeholders and learners.
2. A commitment to provide the highest quality of learning.
3. A common set of values around the "humanity of all learners and their potential".
4. Allowing committed staff to develop new frameworks and different ways of doing their job.
5. Powerful political commitment from external individuals and agencies to the college.

He considers that changes in leadership style have to some extent coincided with changes in the external environment which have impacted significantly on the college. The point at which he came to post in 1996 was still a time when the college was in crisis largely due to the existence of a committee/governance structure which was unable to differentiate between governance and management. The upward shift in performance was brought about first and foremost by the director who transformed governance through moving the committee from seeing the centre as a community resource to a business. Significantly, the number of local external institutions declined from ten in the 1990s to a remnant of three at the current time. In particular, the success of his institution was based on changing the core values and moving them away from what he recognised as "Community, voluntary values of everything for free, don't need to keep records and people can have what they want, to the development of a structured, organised educational institution".

Central to this was a singular leadership, rather than leadership by committee. Also important was the need to understand the data and manage it properly. Third was the critical role of getting the right personnel and involving them in all aspects of the Centre’s work. Finally, the Centre changed its provision from that of an evening institute with an emphasis on crafts, to ICT and Skills for Life. The employment patterns of tutors were changed and technological innovation was used as a driver to improve efficiency and understand the strengths and weaknesses of the institution. The management style is very much hands on with the Director being directly involved in all aspects of the business.

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He considers that changes in leadership style have to some extent coincided with changes in the external environment which have impacted significantly on the college. The point at which he came to post in 1997 was the beginning of a turbulent period when the mission of the college coincided with the national agenda around widening participation; leading the college at that point was unorthodox. The college has retained a reputation for high quality but is now struggling financially; this difficult time requires a more dextrous leadership to find opportunities to “keep the ship afloat”.

He feels that his own leadership style is a paradoxical mixture of “tell ‘em nowt”, in which he only builds relationships with the power brokers, and a more inclusive style in which he involves everyone in everything. The previous principal had a heroic, charismatic style – he has never aspired to this, but he considers that the previous principal also varied between hands off and hands on, as the situation demanded.

Institution F

Institution F is a very small specialist designated institution with a turnover of less than £7m with fewer than a dozen staff. In terms of quality it had three progressively improving inspections resulting in an outstanding inspection in 2004.

Leadership Style and Management Change

The current director was appointed in 1996 and came into an organisation that was in crisis largely due to the existence of a committee/governance structure which was unable to differentiate between governance and management. The upward shift in performance was brought about first and foremost by the director who transformed governance through moving the committee from seeing the centre as a community resource to a business. Significantly, the number of local external institutions declined from ten in the 1990s to a remnant of three at the current time. In particular, the success of his institution was based on changing the core values and moving them away from what he recognised as “Community, voluntary values of everything for free, don’t need to keep records and people can have what they want, to the development of a structured, organised educational institution”.

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His view is that the college, despite its radical image, is a conservative hierarchical institution in which staff like to see the Principal as first among equals. He has sought to change this and move to a more collective organization as the current state does not generate dynamism or change. As Principal, he has consciously reconstructed the curriculum and built up certain areas of work making the college more diverse in terms of the student groups it recruits; equally he has focussed on having the “right people on the boat”, choosing the right people to drive his agenda forward and “getting rid” of others wherever possible. Outside consultants were not used, nor did he consciously model the changes on any other organization. He stated the importance of having one central objective, in this case to place the learning experience at the centre of all work. He has used external awards as a driver in the college, and believes that the college has tended to coast between external inspections.

The core values of the college relating to adult residential education are historic and have not changed, but questions remain about how these translate into activity that satisfies both learners and funders. The college does not fit the patterns of the rest of the sector and he sees his key role as providing the funding, space and time to allow others to take these core values forward.

When asked how he has achieved commitment to necessary changes within the college, he replied “flattery, begging, giving a vision of a better world”. He feels that the college differs from others in terms of staff relations. It did not undergo the turbulence of bad staff relations in the 1990s felt elsewhere in the sector and it has sought to achieve consensus with the trade unions which does contribute to a slower pace of change. There is some passive resistance and non-compliance which he feels cannot continue. He talked about not resenting conflict and opposition, but disliking lethargy and apathy. He focuses on change agents within the institution. Change did involve changes in personnel and one strategy has always been to pay above sector average in many areas, the disadvantage of this is that people are slow and reluctant to move on.

Like other principals, he sees technology as very important in terms of the production of MIS which highlights deficiencies and helps managers keep control of the situation. Technology has also driven teaching forward, but this has been spasmodic. He describes his personal leadership style as “centralised de-centralised leadership”, veering between very restricted leadership from the front and distributed leadership. He agreed that this could be described as situational.

Measuring Success

Principal G outlined the key criteria that could be used to measure the success of an institution in the FE sector as:

- Success rates,
- Student satisfaction,
- Peer evaluation,
- External evaluation,
- Reputation,

but with the caveat that this is very difficult to measure.

He has concerns about some of the new measures being discussed by the LSC, for example the balance of funding, or amount of reserves.

He considers that most of the criteria used to measure success in the private sector are not applicable to FE, in that FE cannot or should not measure share price or assets and reserves. However there has been a move to quality of product and process in the private sector from which the FE sector can learn and there are possibilities for the coming together of public and private around quality. In his view leadership is grossly over-rated as a concept. For him, successful colleges are brought about by efficient and effective management as opposed to leadership.

Conclusions

Our research suggests that there are common features to all of these successful institutions in terms of objectives, but that there are also important differences in the way in which they are achieved. The key factors common to all of the providers were:

- A clear mission to which all in the college subscribed [governors, stakeholders, staff and learners].
- A clear commitment to quality and the learner at the centre of quality improvement.
- Having the “right people on the right bus”.
- A strong sense of values in personal and corporate behaviour.
- A clear understanding of the roles of governors, senior managers and managers.
- The importance of having good data and using it to identify issues to be addressed and for ongoing quality improvement.

However, within these core “generic” values or aspirations, there were significant differences in how they were applied, ranging from highly centralised systems, (“benevolent Stalinism”) to highly distributed systems of leadership. Similarly there were significant differences between those where the SMT was the driving force through to those who focussed change and development on curriculum leaders/heads of department.

All of those interviewed were acutely aware of the changes that had taken place within the sector over the previous fifteen years and that there had been a significant change in leadership. In particular there was a recognition that the “macho-management” of the early years of incorporation was inappropriate for the more mature sector in the early twenty first century. This experience had caused many principals to analyse their situation and make clear decisions about the future role of the organisation and, in particular, using Collins’ terminology “focus on the one thing”; and this one thing was...
improving the quality of the learner experience, concentrating on a core business of teaching and learning. However it should be said that there was an unease amongst some principals that the contest was changing and a more “macho” style of management was re-emerging in a context of merger, consolidation and a more competitive environment.

Similarly, there was close to unanimity on “first who then what”. Principals consistently referred to “getting the right people on the bus”, but when this was explored, it seemed to be that the vision and the strategy came first and that the right people to take this forward came second. All of the organisations, whilst recognising the centrality of personnel, seemed to focus on strategy and mission as the key initial driver, which differed from Collins’ dictum of personnel first.

Similarly, it was recognised that re-structuring, although carried out by all, was something which was overdone in the sector, and a common feature was a need for simplicity and that if organisations concentrated on improving the quality of the learning experience and their outcomes, then the mode of achieving this became less important. There is no doubt that the longer the principal’s tenure, the more they stressed that they had relaxed over their period in office. It was interesting that the most recently appointed principal was the one who stressed that non-compliance was simply not acceptable, whereas the longest serving principal was much more concerned with negotiation and persuasion.

All of the colleges acknowledged technology as being an important accelerator of change, and all saw MIS as the critical area. All had a clear understanding of its role in helping to understand strengths and weaknesses and how this could be utilised to drive through change.

In terms of leadership style, there were clear differences and the styles identified by the researchers were:

College A – Distributed Leadership
College B – Reputational Leadership
College C – Performance Leadership
College D – Transformational Leadership
College E – Centralising Leadership
College F – Singular Hands on Leadership
College G – Situational Leadership

Although these were seen as a key feature of each principal’s leadership, it should be recognised that leadership and management was much more multi-faceted in each of the institutions.

Distributed leadership involved a situation in which bureaucracy was kept to a minimum, where once the pattern had been set and the previous problems had been solved, there was a deliberate diminution of the “power to control” to “unlocking talent by encouraging distributed leadership throughout the college”.

The second case study was characterized by what might be termed reputational leadership. Central to this is the reputation of the college with all of its constituents. For example, the principal was set targets by the governors for enhancing the college reputation through inputs in the educational press. The size and reputation of the college was utilised to influence funding bodies.

The third case study had at its core performance management. The college had clear goals, and there were procedures to achieve parity with the sector, then targets above benchmark. Cross-college data was used so there was no hiding place for poor performance. In particular, there was an emphasis in maintaining the supportive egalitarian atmosphere created by the last principal but, at the same time, a perception that this could be abused and that measures had been put in place to correct this. The principal argued that the key difference in her role was a strong focus on performance and careful scrutiny of all aspects of the college.

The fourth leadership style might be characterised as transformational leadership. The leader’s role in this case was to act as the arbiter in many cases “not to make decisions”, but to create the structures and systems that allowed people throughout the organisation to make them. Leadership was about tying together the key values of the organisation, the mission, structure, policies and procedures so that it allowed individuals at all levels to take responsibility for change and development. The leader was the “adhesive” that held the elements together.

The fifth college had a centralised leadership. Although it had a view of the college as a civic college, it was organised on a much more centralised basis with the Principal as the critical interpreter of external policy drives and being the arbiter of collegedevelopment. This centralised organisational system “seriously disempowered” heads of faculty/department in terms of policy and finance. Their role was to concentrate on products and people. This was in sharp contrast to many of the other institutions in this study where heads of faculty/department were seen as the key drivers.

The sixth institution had a leadership style that was singular and hands on. To a certain extent this was due to the size of the institution which was significantly smaller than the other case studies. However, it was also a direct response to the history of the institution which had been seriously hampered by governance structures that had interfered with the day-to-day management of the Centre and the significant proportion of part-time teaching staff.

Leadership in the seventh institution was situational. Although the college has a clear mission and clear core values to which all subscribe, it operates within an ongoing difficult financial context and it has had to develop a flexible operational pattern. This has veered between highly centralised and highly de-centralised systems of strategic and operation management.
Executive Summary

This research report seeks to evaluate whether 6 "outstanding" FE colleges meet the criteria of a "learning organisation". The research found that some of the 6 organisations invested in "building trust relationships" leading to positive attitudes to change and organisation development. The emphasis placed by "outstanding" colleges on employee involvement and building positive relationships between employees is key to their learning culture. However, the research also concluded that not all "outstanding" colleges are learning organisations, even though they are high-performance in some cases leaders did not proactively create learning opportunities for staff. Whilst in most of the participating colleges the views of people are valued, the power to make decisions resides predominantly with the DfT, which can result in reduced levels of innovation, experimentation and risk-taking. The research found that, despite maintaining good communication with all employees, some senior leaders monopolise strategic decision-making and, at times, work against the espoused culture of learning, "safety to take risks" and "comfort with error". This report therefore highlights a tension between a positive approach to learning and an on-going reluctance to liberate talent and decision-making.

Introduction

This research report seeks to evaluate whether 6 FE colleges, which have been judged as "outstanding" by Ofsted, meet the criteria of a "learning organisation". The research explored colleges which had attained exceptionally high grades in inspection in 2005-06; in most cases grade 1 in all 5 key areas of inspection, including grade 1 for leadership and management, capacity to improve and overall effectiveness. It is likely that colleges will need to display the characteristics of learning organisations in order to meet the challenges of the forthcoming Further Education Act (October 2007) but there are few mechanisms in place to evaluate colleges' readiness.

The Common Inspection Framework (CIF) used by Ofsted partially meets this need, but there are clear differences between the different principals. One principal felt that the public sector should utilise more private sector quality criteria and that in a world of increasing contestability, this will be fundamental to the future well-being of the sector. Others were neutral or hostile to their utilisation. In particular, it was felt this would move colleges away from their primary responsibility to the locality and its learners.

Finally, an interesting point that emerged from at least two of the interviews was the idea of the FE leader as "branch manager". As government policy has become more directive and funding body surveillance has become tighter, there is a view that the FE college is just another branch of a national policy and that the college principal acts within a national company with an increasingly limited area in which to develop their own distinctive package. This is clearly an area which would benefit from further research.

Acknowledgments

The researchers would like to thank those principals/chief executives who agreed to be interviewed.

References

The importance of innovation

I believe that the key challenge for colleges is to create a learning culture across the organisation, with innovation as its goal. This is supported by Donovan’s research for the LSDA. He anticipates the increasing importance of innovative climates at an operational level in colleges. Although recognising that “political pressure for evidence of impact may stifle innovation” (ibid, p.16), he warns against a risk-averse culture in education: “Good leaders need to demonstrate excitement about innovative teaching and learning. If they do, they can add momentum for change.”

What emerges from the political landscape is a need for colleges to reconcile short-term targets with long-term sustainability and to be both internally and externally facing. Public sector organisations ... this as a need to simply develop an individual’s competencies, through education and training, warning that “merely chanting the mantra – training, training, training – will not prove sufficient” (ibid, p.7). The tradition of “in-service training days” in education is now hopelessly out-of-date.

Mulgan and Albury (2003) highlight the importance of effective knowledge management systems and processes that will facilitate organisational learning and innovation. Notably, they stress that ... public sector is important. Mulgan and Albury identify 3 inter-related policy roles with respect to innovation (ibid, p.4):

1. Policy innovation (i.e. creation of new policies and initiatives).
2. Innovations in the policy-making process.
3. Having a policy to foster innovation and its diffusion.

Mulgan and Albury point to an absence of high quality research on innovation in the public sector and yet are optimistic that public sector organisations are well-placed to learn and generate new ideas. They argue that, all too often, “innovation is sometimes seen as an optional luxury or an added burden” (ibid, p.5). They point to 8 barriers to public sector innovation (ibid, p.31). I agree with 4 of these:

1. A culture of risk aversion.
2. Short-term budgets and planning horizons.
3. Poor skills in active risk or change management.
4. Technologies available but constraining organisational arrangements.

Research Framework

The concept of a “learning organisation” is often depicted in organisation development research as the mythical destination of a perilous journey (Altman and Iles 1998; O’Keefe 2005). This perceived difficulty is compounded by the relative youth of theory and practice around organisational learning. This has led to misinterpretation, such as a belief that organisations can build organisational learning by creating “learning centres” or by employing “knowledge officers” (Wilhelm 2003) or “learning and development managers”, rather than grasping the fact that a learning organisation is a form of organisation, not an addition to it. Misinterpretation aside, the starting point for many organisations can be low and many must overcome deeply-embedded learning disabilities, for example, an inability to take a long-term view, in order to successfully create a learning organisation (Senge 1990).

Drawing in part upon the research of Senge (1990) and Garratt (2000), I propose the following definition of a learning organisation:

“A learning organisation is one in which conscious and continuous learning takes place, between all employees and stakeholders, leading to permanent change.”

In a learning organisation, individual and group action learning helps the whole organisation to grasp a more accurate view of its current reality, supported by a process of critical reflection and self-assessment. This in turn generates new ideas and actions that contribute to a shared purpose.

The importance of generating new ideas establishes an important link with the theme of innovation and the task of creating a climate in which innovation is encouraged. Previous research on workplace innovation is very relevant to our understanding of effective organisational learning. The distinction between a learning organisation and organisational learning is important. I consider the former to be a form of organisation and the latter to be an activity or process. Senge’s (1990) analysis of organisational learning disabilities is a powerful warning signal. These learning disabilities can be summarised as follows:

1. A focus on individual responsibilities to the detriment of organisational purpose.
2. The tendency to blame others.
3. An inability to see how we contribute to our own problems.
4. An excessive focus on events rather than longer-term thinking.
5. An inability to pay attention to the subtle as well as the dramatic.
6. The tendency to not directly experience the impact of the decisions that we make.
7. The tendency to reward people who advocate our views as leaders, thereby blocking new perspectives.

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2. The tendency to blame others.
3. An inability to see how we contribute to our own problems.
4. An excessive focus on events rather than longer-term thinking.
5. An inability to pay attention to the subtle as well as the dramatic.
6. The tendency to not directly experience the impact of the decisions that we make.
7. The tendency to reward people who advocate our views as leaders, thereby blocking new perspectives.
These are all internal constraints to innovation and, therefore, likely to be felt acutely by the workforce that we rely on to foster innovation. However, I am less inclined to agree with the following:

5. Over-reliance on high performers as sources of innovation.
6. Reluctance to close down failing programmes or organizations.
7. Delivery pressures and administrative burdens.
8. No rewards or incentives to innovate or adopt innovations.

Whilst these 4 barriers could slow down the process of innovation in the public sector, any individual institution that has a culture of learning can navigate through these barriers. I strongly believe that if public sector institutions can address their internal barriers to learning and innovation, they will thrive.

In summary, I believe that the drivers of change that we can apply to most organisations are equally applicable to public sector organisations and present a strong case for the promotion of learning. Research on effective change management and organisational culture demonstrates the value of learning as a means of anticipating and embracing complexity. Morgan (1997) emphasises the importance of scanning and anticipating environmental change, alongside a process of challenging the operating norms and assumptions, as he states:

“Learning organizations have to develop skills and mindsets that embrace environmental change as a norm.... It is by seeing and thinking about the context of their industry and activities in new ways that they are able to envisage and create new possibilities.”

Research Methods

My initial motivation for the research was to stimulate reflection and learning across the sector. In broad terms, the research paradigm used is phenomenological. This means that it values what is subjective and exploratory. I considered aspects of epistemology before thinking about methodology. Time spent understanding epistemology (exploring the questions what is knowledge? and how is it acquired?) would prove to be invaluable in ensuring the reliability and validity of this research. By engaging participants in free-flowing and engaging dialogue, and by using direct quotation in my findings, new knowledge would emerge. Dialogue would help to create knowledge and not just serve as illustration. My research was therefore an example of a constructivist epistemology, which has the following characteristics:

Each individual constructs their own view of the world based on experiences and perception.

Research gathers subjective accounts that reveal how the world is experienced and constructed by people.

Insight into human behaviour is sought.

It is appropriate for studying inherently subjective phenomena such as individual experience, relationships and motivation.

There are multiple interpretations of reality.

Theory tends to be grounded in the data provided by participants.

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Dialogue would have as its focus an understanding of the lived experience of people. People’s beliefs would also be valuable, as these underpin their current practice.

The constructivist approach borrows significantly from the philosophy which underpins collaborative inquiry where,

“The concept of active participation by people is central to collaborative inquiry, because here it is reports of lived experience which are the data on which subsequent action is taken to improve effectiveness.” (Stewart, 1994)

An interest in understanding behaviour from the perspective of the participants is equally applicable to education as it is to collaborative inquiry. Furthermore, I was aware that I was not only a “researcher”, but also a “practitioner” in the FE sector. Any attempt to be detached from the inquiry would be flawed. As Reason (1992) explains:

“In traditional research, the roles of researcher and subject are mutually exclusive... In cooperative inquiry these mutually exclusive roles give way to a cooperative relationship based on bilateral initiative and control, so that all involved work together as co-researchers and co-subjects.”

I also found it useful to note that a full understanding of context is also integral to phenomenological inquiry.

My sample for this research project was drawn from 6 FE colleges which were judged by Ofsted (in 2005-06, the first year of the present inspection cycle) to be “outstanding” in 4 or 5 areas. In all cases, colleges were judged by inspectors to be “outstanding” under the 3 following headings: “overall effectiveness”, “capacity to improve” and “leadership and management”. In each college I met separately with members of the senior team, middle managers, first-line managers and employees who had joined the organisation within the last 6 months as teaching staff. In total, 47 employees were interviewed. A desk study analysis of judgements on “leadership and management” made by inspectors in 2 other categories has also formed part of the research: (a) colleges judged to be “satisfactory” under each of the 3 same headings; and (b) colleges whose grades for these areas had dropped since the previous inspection cycle.
allowing the data to compromise my definition of a learning organisation. I revisited my data and came to realise, for example, that I could not brush to one side the fact that some senior managers had appeared as uncompromising and occasionally autocratic on strategic matters. I also concluded that I had not given sufficient weight to conscious promotion of learning by managers. Whilst I had evidence across the sample of a learning culture, I came to question whether all of what I had seen was truly part of a conscious process and, if not, how sustainable were the learning cultures?

**Research Findings**

Arising from my literature review was the view that learning organisations typically choose to take the following 3 steps (among others):

1. They value process more than structure.
2. Leaders are very proactive in creating learning opportunities for people and teams.
3. They critically self-assess.

**Proposition 1: Learning organisations value process over structure.**

This area of my research yielded more data than my investigation into other propositions (possibly due to the close correlation between this proposition and the subject of leadership behaviours). ... willing to discuss leadership behaviours but, also, this gave rise to some very important differences between colleges.

In short, whilst all colleges demonstrated a genuine commitment to the strategic contribution and involvement of employees at all levels, only in 2 of the 6 organisations did this feel fully authentic... being unable to tell stories of how they had, at a lower level, been able to contribute to, shape or re-frame strategy.

At first, this discrepancy was not apparent to me. Conversely, I was struck by what these 6 organisations had in common; namely, the investment by all organisations in "building trusting relationships"... and organisation development. Trust, I found, is fostered through working processes in a number of ways, for example:

- The views of employees are frequently sought and actioned;
- There are high levels of internal promotion;
- Employees at operational levels are involved in forward-planning;

I chose to visit colleges and undertake conversations in settings that are familiar to participants. Usually, conversations were with small groups of colleagues. I avoided using a pre-established set of questions; rather, I prefaced each meeting by emphasising that I would like participants to talk about what matters to them and to offer stories wherever possible. My first question in interviews was, "If I had been an employee working in this organisation for the last 6 months, what stories might I be telling about leadership?" This very open question was effective in (a) encouraging participants to build a subjective image; (b) encouraging open reflection and (c) providing me with a link into discussing working processes.

I was very conscious throughout the interviews that I am a practitioner in the FE sector. Whilst this provided me with the self-confidence to maintain my focus and an ability to understand when participants were discussing exceptional practices rather than organisational norms, with it comes my personal bias. On occasions this was not channelled constructively. For example, I inadvertently used closed questions ("Do you do such-and-such...?", "Have you ever tried...?", "Does anyone...?"). These occasional mistakes in my interviewing technique invariably resulted in a slowing down of the flow of conversation. Conversely, I found that a constructive use of my experience was in asking open questions such as, "Can you tell me more about...?" or "How has this changed over time?". These and similar questions were used when my own bias suggested to me that something significant had been mentioned by a participant in passing, but perhaps he/she had not realised its significance and I wanted more illustration or confirmation of the idea.

Overall, I was surprised by the level of emotion raised by the interviews. Later evaluation of when and why interviewees tended to display emotion led me to conclude that participants talked with most animation when they believed that they were describing something positive that was unique to their organisation. Identifying these periods of emotion was significant in informing me about the authenticity of people's stories. For example, one junior manager told me, whilst discussing people's willingness to adapt and change roles, "I think less about my specialism and more about my skills-set capability". I might ordinarily have dismissed this comment as somewhat jargonistic, but I can still recall the emphasis and enthusiasm given to the remark by the participant. It therefore became easier for me to see the comment as supporting the suggestion introduced earlier in the day by the senior leader that, "All managers must deconstruct and find new ways of operating".

This gives an insight into how I analysed my data. That is to say, I chose to give importance to dialogue which had been conducted with a degree of emotion. This, in part, explains why my findings are less extensive regarding my proposition that learning organisations critically self-assess. Whilst self-assessment is a key activity in colleges, no college sees their work in this area as unique.

More broadly, I analysed my data by seeking to find patterns between the separate research interviews within a single organisation and then across all organisations. At this point, I initially made the error of not being sufficiently critical of the data because I knew that these were successful organisations. My error was one of allowing the data to compromise my definition of a learning organisation. I revisited my data and came to realise, for example, that I could not brush to one side the fact that some senior managers had appeared as uncompromising and occasionally autocratic on strategic matters. I also concluded that I had not given sufficient weight to conscious promotion of learning by managers. Whilst I had evidence across the sample of a learning culture, I came to question whether all of what I had seen was truly part of a conscious process and, if not, how sustainable were the learning cultures?

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**Proposition 1: Learning organisations value process over structure.**

This area of my research yielded more data than my investigation into other propositions (possibly due to the close correlation between this proposition and the subject of leadership behaviours). The proposition implies that learning organisations attach greater value to systemic relationships than to hierarchical lines of power. Not only did I find participants very willing to discuss leadership behaviours but, also, this gave rise to some very important differences between colleges.

In short, whilst all colleges demonstrated a genuine commitment to the strategic contribution and involvement of employees at all levels, only in 2 of the 6 organisations did this feel fully authentic... being unable to tell stories of how they had, at a lower level, been able to contribute to, shape or re-frame strategy.

At first, this discrepancy was not apparent to me. Conversely, I was struck by what these 6 organisations had in common; namely, the investment by all organisations in "building trusting relationships"... and organisation development. Trust, I found, is fostered through working processes in a number of ways, for example:

- The views of employees are frequently sought and actioned;
- There are high levels of internal promotion;
- Employees at operational levels are involved in forward-planning;
People perceive themselves as belonging to networks within the organisation; Success is publicly celebrated and often leads to reward.

I formed the view that these 6 “outstanding” colleges were demonstrating a greater commitment to employee involvement than was evident through my desk study of “satisfactory” colleges. In the latter, Ofsted had identified key weaknesses such as the lack of clarity at every level about the strategic priorities for the college and an associated lack of coherence in strategic planning. The emphasis placed by “outstanding” colleges on building positive relationships between employees is key to their learning culture.

In 2 colleges, I noted very credible and systemic approaches to reducing hierarchy and the constraints of the organisational structure by valuing people’s involvement i.e. empowering employees regardless of level. With this also came a more humble approach to leadership, as one principal noted: “We hide our light. We’re also comfortable with error – managers are uncertain about us sometimes but we like that creative tension”. This principal has created a new forum for decision-making outside of the senior team. “The biggest decision was that we will not run this college by the senior team. We constantly ask ourselves, ‘Does this decision need to be made by this team?’”. If not, a wider forum of middle managers is called upon to reach a decision.

In another college, turbulence and complexity in the FE sector have brought exceptionally high levels of employee empowerment. The culture is one based on alertness to the environment in order to collectively build and re-build the organisation’s consensus over its strategic direction. Employees at every level, I noted, are spending time networking in the community and learning about policy and potential business development opportunities. The Principal remarked that, “The college is on a journey of discovery learning. I want the people on the ground to flesh the vision out”. The stories and views of people on the ground helped me to understand that, in the case of these 2 colleges, there existed an authenticity to the senior team’s efforts to value process over structure. Elsewhere, albeit to differing degrees, I found less evidence of this.

In 2 colleges, for example, I observed that there were open and well-promoted channels of communication through to the senior team but a clear sense that senior team members were not accustomed to delegating responsibility for decision-making. There are, for example, relatively few instances of projects and planning groups being led by someone outside of the senior group, despite evidence that most of the organisation’s most successful innovations have arisen from other levels. At another college, I noted a willingness on the part of the executive group to promote networking and “working parties”, but the parameters were evidently communicated from the top. There, the Principal described the process of asking the question, “Have we got enough information yet?”, which struck me as being some distance from the mental model underpinning the question, “Does this decision need to be made by this (senior) team?”. A common characteristic of these colleges was that whilst there was evidence of some individuals being given high levels of autonomy, there was an absence of systemic autonomy. For example, in one college, the concept of “business development” was encapsulated in a role given to an individual (a business development manager reporting through to a senior manager). This contrasted with the best examples of empowerment elsewhere, in which all employees shared a sense of responsibility for business development.

In addressing the question of to what extent were the colleges in my sample valuing process over structure, a spectrum is already apparent. What stretches this spectrum further, however, is their differing approaches to leading organisational learning. The theme of leadership became increasingly important as I analysed my data. Initially, I had expected to find that leadership was basically a neutral variable. Certainly, the Ofsted reports for these colleges used very similar language to describe leadership and management and the grading was almost identical across the 6 colleges. But I encountered distinct differences which, in my view, have a bearing upon how sustainable the college would be, as a learning organisation, if the principal were to leave.

I never failed to encounter principals who were “visionary” but I also observed leadership behaviours which I would describe as excessively “strong”, less open to challenge than elsewhere and less humble. Gamat (2007) points to the “irresponsibility” of senior leaders who seek to dominate the “business brain”. This arises when senior leaders play too dominant a role in quality control, see the development of external partnerships as primarily their role and communicate bold policy statements as rhetoric. I came to be concerned about some of the statements that I heard from senior executives:

“I’ve told the staff here that now we’re going to be world-class.”

“I set the tone.”

“Make your mind up about us, because we may not be right for you.”

“There’s an expectation that if you don’t perform, you go.”

“You either love this place or you get out.”

“We don’t put up with complacency and anything that is (just) satisfactory.”

“Quality improvement pervades from the top.”

I felt that these comments revealed inflexibility about how process would be valued. “Process” requires not only the involvement of people at all levels, but also autonomy for employees and a culture that values experimentation and risk. In summary, I was not convinced that these highly successful colleges are collectively showing a commitment to deconstructing hierarchical practices and empowering individuals to contribute to their potential.
that leaders lacked proactivity in encouraging employees to undertake learning external to the organisation or, indeed, external to the FE sector. I also noted that teams do not learn from other teams in a structured way, i.e. time is not set aside to share best practice. These weaknesses undermine the ability of colleges adequately to scan their environment and adapt to changing circumstances, despite much evidence to support the proposition.

Proposition 3: In colleges that are learning organisations, self-assessment is rigorous and critical

Whilst self-assessment is a crucial characteristic of a learning organisation, I gathered considerably less data about it than about other propositions. This is not surprising given that self-assessment processes have become the norm in FE colleges over the last 14 years and much of their format is prescribed by funding and inspection bodies. Self-assessment is intended as a critical reflection upon performance and progress by teams at every level. My research was more specifically interested in the processes that existed in colleges to ensure that self-assessment is “rigorous and critical” and that it is linked to learning. Certainly, in “satisfactory” colleges, there is evidence of a significant gap.

My fieldwork led me to conclude that the process followed in “outstanding” colleges overcame these weaknesses and that self-assessment was accurately capturing progress and enabling reflective practice. A few characteristics of self-assessment are common to all colleges that I visited:

- Self-assessment reports are initially written at course team level and all course team members are involved in expressing views about strengths and areas for further development.
- First-line managers are given an opportunity to discuss emerging judgements and action-plans with peers.
- Self-assessment reports for all areas of college activity are validated internally (either through cross-college committees or by means of a management “conference”).
- Self-assessment processes are externally validated. Each college belongs to a network of colleges.
- Above all, the processes are founded upon the use of dialogue through which both quantitative and qualitative data are evaluated.
I noted that senior leaders and middle managers described quality improvement as part of a long-term strategy. The investment of time in building regional networks and in the organisation of off-site conferences to enable managers to review the work of peers indicated the willingness of managers to avoid knee-jerk reactions and to conduct self-assessment in a climate of trust. Overall, “outstanding” colleges’ skills in self-assessment seemed to be a valuable exemplar in the field of research into learning organisations.

Conclusions

The purpose of this project was to evaluate the extent to which “outstanding” FE colleges are learning organisations. Whilst it is the nature of a learning organisation to never consider itself as having “arrived” (as it is continually transforming itself through “double-loop” learning), I believe that it is perfectly feasible to observe the key characteristics of a learning organisation. My first conclusion is that I feel convinced that it is possible to make a judgement about the extent to which one is seeing my 3 characteristics in action. I also concluded that not all “outstanding” colleges are learning organisations, even though they are high-performing. In summary, I reached this conclusion on the basis that:

1. In a majority of colleges, leaders do not demonstrate sufficient proactivity in creating learning opportunities. As a result, there are reduced levels of innovation and bringing in of new knowledge from outside.

2. In most colleges, whilst the views of people are valued, the power to make decisions resides predominantly with the senior team. As a result, there are reduced levels of experimentation and risk-taking.

3. Despite the fact that they maintain good communication with all employees, some senior leaders monopolise strategic decision-making and business development activities and, at times, work against the espoused culture of “safety to take risks” and “comfort with error”.

This research found relatively little that is new about self-assessment in FE colleges. But self-assessment remains important because it is a concept that the FE sector can offer up as a model of good practice to other types of organisation, in both the private and not-for-profit sectors. Self-assessment in outstanding colleges is an integral part of a learning culture, laying down challenges for people and systems at all levels.

Each of the 6 colleges is at a different stage in meeting the criteria that I have used. One college is unquestionably closest to meeting the criteria. Although I noted relatively low levels of external networking by employees outside of the senior team, at this college I observed the following:

1. A genuine commitment by the senior team to devolve decision-making.

2. Evidence that senior leaders promote a climate for learning and innovation by recognising their own errors, celebrating the achievements of all staff and involving themselves in learning and development.

3. Widespread use of action-learning and mentoring processes.

4. Formal processes for networking between different teams.

5. Reflective practice and rigour through the self-assessment cycle.

This report concludes that there remains a tension between, on the one hand, a positive and proactive approach to learning and development and, on the other hand, an on-going reluctance to liberate talent and decision-making (i.e. a controlling management culture).

Acknowledgements

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Leading E-Learning During Organisational Transformation

Norman Borrett, Bradford College

Executive Summary

This project explored how leaders within a large FE college harness and integrate e-learning during a period of transformational change. On the basis of a review of the leadership literature, we suggest that the term "managerial leadership" best represents leadership as part of a manager's role set. Our research indicates that the leadership styles driving change at a pedagogical level are a mixture of facilitative, distributed and empowered leadership, whereas at executive level command and control styles of leadership were deployed with respect to questions of e-learning infrastructure, policy and resources. The research found that a complex mix of leadership styles exists in the case study college, ranging from managerialist at one end of the "managerial leadership" continuum, to facilitative, distributed and empowered at the other. A number of recommendations are made to assist principals and executive directors in their formulation of a leadership framework that encourages all members of the organisation to maximise the contribution of e-learning to realise the 16-19 agenda.

Introduction

This research project explored how leaders within an FE college based in the north of England developed e-learning during a period of transformational change. A focus for the research was evaluating leadership strategies for the delivery of learning and training for the young people 14-19 curriculum. A series of questions were addressed as part of this agenda:

1. How do we best meet the needs and aspirations of young learners by drawing upon the potential of ICT?
2. What contribution can e-learning make to the provision of highly flexible, good quality, learner focussed education for this age group?
3. What aspects of technical support and staff development must be addressed to underpin the above?
4. What are the key leadership issues that must be addressed to enable 1-3 to happen?

In 2005, a new principal was faced with a large financial deficit, a management and accountability structure that did not seem to be functioning efficiently, and problems of student retention and recruitment. The action taken was to place all 122 staff with management responsibilities (except members of the executive directorate) into a redundancy pool, and to restructure the college. There were also targeted redundancies for college tutors. Department based structures that had enjoyed a
certain degree of freedom and control were abandoned, and new market sectors were created. This was accompanied by greater central control of key functions such as finance, admissions, recruitment and staff development. Understandably, these actions had a major impact on staff motivation and morale.

In the two years since re-organisation there have been attempts to improve morale through better information and communication systems, alongside a commitment to become the premier further and higher education college in the UK. At the heart of this commitment is investment in a new £50 million accommodation strategy that will provide state-of-the-art intelligent teaching and learning environments, as well as ambitious areas of growth in student numbers, particularly in the 14-19 area. The study explored the new systems and procedures for integrating learning technologies within teaching, student learning and assessment, the role of learning technologies in the new accommodation strategy, and the leadership processes that were at the heart of the change process.

This report explores a selected number of leadership strategies, and considers the visibility of these strategies within the case study college. The first part of this paper considers a range of theoretical approaches to leadership. The next section describes the research methods, as well as their limitations and the ethical issues that require consideration. The third section of the paper considers the research findings and the implications of these findings for the case study college. Finally, summary conclusions and a set of recommendations for future action are made.

**Research Framework**

Bolden (2004) argues that 21st Century organisations are facing new challenges where “heroic” notions of charismatic and control based leaders are being replaced by leaders who encourage shared responsibilities. There has been a great deal of research discussion over the last decade on variations of new leadership models including collaborative leadership (Raelin, 2003), shared leadership (Smith, 2007), empowered leadership (Howard, 1997), facilitative leadership (Lashway, 1995), and distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006), amongst others.

Of course, it is not necessary to view these different leadership styles as “either-or”. Effective, flexible leaders may adopt a more contingent style, mixing and matching charismatic, directional, hierarchical approaches along with collaborative, shared, empowering, facilitative and distributed practices in the light of differences and changes in context. Indeed, in their study on leadership in the FE sector, Collinson and Collinson (2005) argue for a “blended" approach to leadership that recognises the benefits and weaknesses of both “hierarchical” and “shared” styles of leadership. This of course assumes a more reflective approach to leadership that somehow overcomes the in-built, ingrained personality traits of each individual.

**A note on the management v leadership debate**

The growth of large, complex organisations led to the creation of management hierarchies in order to maintain control over processes such as planning, budgeting, reporting, and supervising. Leadership however, is about initiating and dealing with change, now a vital factor with significant changes in technology, competition, regulation, economic and demographic changes occuring more and more frequently. Some of the differences between the activities of managers and leaders have been summarised by Field (2002). Perhaps a better term to use is “managerial leadership”, where leadership is seen as part of a manager’s entire role set rather than separate from it (Figure 1). Hence we could talk about “non-managerial leadership” just as we talk about non-executive directors.

In our own study, we witnessed a variety of leadership styles, and different approaches seemed to be based on context and role. The size and scope of this study, and the limited time available, meant that we had to focus the research as well as the choice of leadership models available. Hence, the remainder of the literature review will consider facilitative, distributed and empowered styles on the one hand, and more traditional “directive” leadership behaviour on the other. These approaches were the most prevalent in our research findings and reflected the different roles leaders played in the organisation.

**Facilitative Leadership**

Facilitative leadership is seen to be the model of choice in cross-functional teams, producing group results that surpass what any individual might achieve. However, it is not about selling up groups and casting them adrift. There is a need for “leading from the front” during a group’s early embryonic stages, when participants need to clarify their shared purpose. As a group matures and its members gain confidence, the group takes on more responsibility and the facilitative leader “contributes from behind” offering insights and observations (Culaude, 2004). Hence facilitative leadership “Creates a landscape of constantly shifting responsibilities and relationships” (Lashway 1995: 3).
In their extensive review of the literature on distributed leadership, Bennett et al (2003) discovered a wide range of variables and challenges. For the purposes of our own study, four are particularly relevant:

1. **Control/autonomy** - the traditional conception in the FE sector is on strong hierarchical control. This contrasts sharply with a more distributed style where the emphasis is on greater collegiality, which may include the ability to influence underpinning values and aims.

2. **Social and cultural context** - this may act positively to support distributed leadership, but it is unlikely that distributed leadership would flourish in a directive, hierarchical context. For example, values such as commitment to truth and enquiry and trust are highly important elements of a culture which encourages distributed leadership.

3. **Dynamics of team working** – the extensive literature on teams and team culture has similarities with the value base of distributed leadership. Teams operate best in a climate of trust, mutual protection, open communication, strong shared common goals, values and beliefs.

4. **Knowledge and expertise** – the research by Bennett et al demonstrates a strong theme of fluid leadership based on expertise exercised through the creation of ad-hoc groups using the specific skills and experiences of individuals.

The above scenario poses challenges. For example, Collinson and Collinson (2005: 9) argue that these new forms of shared power can cause “dilemmas, difficulties and paradoxes”. I have summarised these concerns in Table 1 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paradoxes of Distributed Leadership (from Collinson and Collinson 2005: 9-10)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) How is distributed leadership established in FE settings without the directorate losing some of their legitimacy and power? Is there also a chance that direction, vision and clarity become blurred?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) How does a distributed leadership style in FE cope with the demands of accountability, stringent inspection regimes, complex financial arrangements, and performance targets?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) How does a distributed style cope with the increasing government managerialism in the FE sector?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) How does one ensure in distributing leadership that appropriate power and responsibility is attached to the distributed role? Without power and responsibility the distributed leader is toothless.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Cufaude (2004), facilitative leadership embraces six major themes, or leadership fundamentals (see Table 2 in results section later). A key element in this process is considering leadership intervention on a continuum ranging from gentle to forceful. Figure 2 demonstrates this process:

**Figure 2: Continuum of Intervention**

The continuum demonstrates the range of options available to the leader, who may offer different degrees of intervention according to the nature of the circumstances, the personalities of the group, and the maturity of the group. For example, in the early stages of a group’s formation, a gentle approach will enable individuals to brainstorm ideas, allow opportunities for questions and clarification, and the leader will remain silent at times to allow others space for reflection. However, there will be situations when the leader will need to be more persuasive by asking questions, offering choices and pathways for progress, and establishing procedures for action. Finally, there are occasions when the leader will need to be more forceful and directive so that decisions are made within agreed time spans. There will be times when the leader needs to move the group along or shake-up individuals who are not meeting targets. The facilitative leader will understand the consequences of intervening at different levels, and will select the correct intervention according to the dynamics and maturity of the group or nature of individual problems.

**Distributed Leadership**

One of the reasons for the current popularity for distributed leadership in education is the complex nature of our education environments, and higher demands placed by government on standards, retention, accountability and meeting the needs of employers (Spillane 2000). Even the best qualified principal will not possess all the skills or time needed to master the complex agendas in today’s FE settings. Principals need to distribute leadership to key colleagues throughout the organisation and operate the “principle of comparative advantage”, where those lead who have the expertise (Elmore 2000).

In essence, distributed leadership practice happens through the interactions of people and their situations, and the essence for success is understanding how leadership is distributed (Spillane 2000). One of the challenges here is to decide involves deciding how leadership practice is distributed between leaders and followers. If leadership is commonly understood as something leaders do to followers, from a distributed perspective this is problematic, as followers co-produce practice in interaction with leaders.
The characteristics raised by Bennett et al and the dilemmas highlighted by Collinson and Collinson will form important features for consideration in the interpretation of our research findings.

**Empowered Leadership**

Empowerment is thought to form the backbone of much organisational change (Howard 1997) and has become an attractive feature of modern management practice over the last decade (Spreitzer 1995). However, implementing the concept within complex organisations has proved difficult. At the heart of this concept is a re-alignment of roles and responsibilities and extensive restructuring within the organisation. Associated with this process goes a sharing of power, something that executive managers are sometimes reluctant to accept, along with leadership processes that reflect “concepts and feelings” rather than “rules and structures” (Howard 1995). One of the major problems recognised by Howard (1997) in her study of 25 organisations in the United States was that, whilst leaders strongly favoured the concept of empowerment, they were not taking the bold steps needed to ensure its integration.

It is recognised that one of the important benefits of empowering workers is the increase in work motivation (Wall and Jackson 1995). However, Vaill (1997) argues that empowerment initiatives also lead to a learning process in organisations, and that opportunities to learn, develop new skills and develop self offers much greater reward for both the organisation and individual workers. This is because motivation alone may not lead to improved performance within one’s current role, but learning enhances capacity, and “leads to feelings of increased competency and personal mastery” (Howard 1997: 11). A key responsibility for the leader here is to ensure that workers have the tools, resources and coaching that enable learning to take place. However, Howard (1997) found that one of the main barriers to the effective implementation and embedding of learning within organisations was insufficient investment of time and money within the change process. Other barriers included a lack of appropriate rewards, and a general lack of trust.

**Managerial and Rule-Based Leadership**

Rule-based leadership stands in stark contrast to our earlier discussions of facilitative, distributed and empowered leadership. The impact of restructuring in FE from 1992 brought an end to nationally negotiated contracts, and was replaced by locally based decisions, significant increases in teaching hours, and inferior conditions of service. This was accompanied by a sharp rise in student numbers, tighter resource constraints, new performance measures, restrictions on pay, repeated internal restructuring, and widespread redundancies. By 1998, 20,000 lecturers had left the service, two-thirds of all English and Welsh FE colleges were technically bankrupt, and over half of all FE college principals had resigned (Beale, 2004). These scenarios were often accompanied by aggressive management behaviour dominated by neo-Taylorist and macho-management approaches (Beale, 2004) and a range of factors in the post-1997 period have perpetuated discontent amongst college lecturers (Briggs, 2004).

Espedal (2007) argues that when a desired policy needs to be transformed into reality, rules and rule-based behaviour are better approaches than leadership styles that offer discretion because, “Emotions and impulsive behaviour and conflict and opportunistic behaviour can be detrimental to executive decision making; therefore, it is important to provide constraints or guidelines on executive actions. These constraints should take the form of rules.” (Espedal, 2007: 105)

The argument is that unbridled discretion can threaten a leader’s pursuit of rational action. These threats can take the form of emotion, impulsive and opportunistic behaviour that can impact on good intentions or critical decisions that affect long-term developments.

There is a paucity of research into current managerialism and rule-based forms of leadership. It is hoped that this small case study will illuminate some of these issues and lead to more comprehensive studies in the area.

**Research Methods**

The research was led by a project leader who conducted the bulk of the research, alongside an external consultant who advised on the structure and scope of the project. Senior management in the college were also consulted on aspects of direction and process. The research methods were both quantitative and qualitative and included online surveys, interviews, analysis of key documents and reports, and participant observation. These methods were chosen as they together offer effective triangulation of approaches and provide more reliable results than would any single technique.

Survey Monkey software was used as an online tool to gather information from assistant directors, programme managers, tutors and students. These surveys sought to gain views on a range of e-learning procedures, processes, and policies. As well as structured, matrix and multiple-choice questions, there were also opportunities in the survey for respondents to provide more qualitative thoughts on e-learning issues through open-ended questions. For assistant directors n=69 and programme managers n=29, the survey link was attached to an email circular, and the returns were good (93% and 72%, respectively). For college tutors and students, the survey instruments were made available on the college staff and student intranet sites for a fixed time period of two weeks. The weaknesses and limitations of online and postal surveys are well known, and completion rates tend to be low. Our experience was no exception. However, we did achieve 89 returns for staff and 294 returns for students. Participants were also given the opportunity to receive copies of the findings from the surveys, and all exported data were made anonymous.

The surveys were followed up with eight in-depth interviews with respondents who had indicated a willingness to provide more detailed information. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule based on issues raised in the online survey, and the interviews were audio recorded. A number of college reports,
strategic plans, and policy statements were also analyzed in order to elicit the views of senior managers on the re-organisation process and the vision for the future.

Finally, information was gathered through participant observation within a task group that had been established to undertake a college e-learning benchmarking exercise. In this case the researcher adopted the role of participant-observer rather than observer-participant. Records were kept through a contemporaneous web log that was shared with the project consultant. The researcher was careful not to name individuals in the web log, and to maintain the privacy of the web log between himself and the external consultant.

The results of the surveys were kept confidential, and all contemporaneous notes and audio transcripts from the focus groups and interviews were kept anonymous. All participants in the data gathering exercise were offered opportunities to receive copies of the survey transcripts. Discussions between the researcher and the consultant in the private web log relating to individuals were deleted at the end of the project.

**Research Findings**

**Findings and Discussion from Online Surveys and Interviews**

The online surveys allowed participants to answer structured, matrix and multiple-choice questions as well as more qualitative answers through open-ended questions. Of the 265 tutors circulated, 89 responses were received, representing a 31% return. We also had rich data from 21 programme managers (75% return), and returns from 5 out of 6 assistant directors.

**Tutor Responses**

The purpose of the online survey for tutors was to seek their perceptions of e-learning support and leadership. Two thirds of tutor respondents felt that e-learning was supported in some measure in their programme area or sector.

![Chart 1](image1.png)

There is support in my programme area or sector for innovation and development in the use of e-Learning

- Not true: 14%
- Emergent: 4%
- Partly true: 9%
- Largely true: 11%
- True: 41%
- I don’t know: 21%

When it comes to leadership however, there is a worrying 21% of respondents who feel leadership is lacking in their sector.

![Chart 2](image2.png)

There is leadership in my sector for the development of e-Learning

- Not true: 21%
- Emergent: 14%
- Partly true: 4%
- Largely true: 9%
- True: 41%
- I don’t know: 11%

The above quantitative data need to be evaluated in conjunction with responses from some of the open-ended questions in the survey. One question asked: “What specific help do you think academic staff need to support e-learning integration”: 

**Exhibit 1**

- It would be helpful to have PCs in rooms which have smart boards ...
- ‘Remission’ from teaching duties in order to develop good quality resources. Opportunity to further develop skills.
- Support for initiatives that are in operation Support to develop new initiatives.
- Fully equipped classrooms, with backup and technical support ‘quickly’ at hand. Staff development from specialist in curriculum area.
- It is that old chestnut - TIME! Time to plan what is needed, time to develop the materials, time to train in the use of tools so that you feel confident using them, time to be creative and experiment.
- More storage space and faster processors. Time for development of e-learning materials across common modules. Time to develop more distance learning materials.

Some of the answers provided above endorse the quantitative data and suggest that decision-making processes of leaders are resulting in concern. Indeed support for tutor development, and the time to undertake it, was very much seen as a leadership issue. There is sometimes a lack of joined-up thinking where decisions made by leaders in one part of the organisation are not coordinated with others. An example of this was the purchase of 100 new Smartboards towards the end of a financial year that were efficiently procured and erected in designated classrooms. Unfortunately, there were no PCs made available to enable them to operate. Whilst this is being addressed, it is the sort of thing that causes frustration among tutors. Another example is a surprise announcement that all tutor-based printers will be removed from offices in favour of a more centralised printing process. No consultation, no prior communication, just a simple directive. There is an interesting interplay here between managerial
When it comes to assessing the integration of e-learning into standards and quality assurance procedures, it is clear (Chart 5) that there is a long way to go. Again, this represents a lack of coordinated leadership between those sections of the college empowered to integrate learning technologies into teaching, learning and assessment, and those responsible for quality assurance procedures and processes. An analysis of surveys of students’ perception of courses demonstrates that ICT and e-learning hardly feature in the questions that are asked.

Chart 5
The use of e-learning tools is fully integrated into standards & QA procedures

Interview Results and Discussion
As well as the quantitative results referred to above, the more open-ended questions in our survey for programme managers were used as semi-structured questions for more in-depth interviews. The results from these interviews supported some of the concerns raised about support and leadership:

The tutor interviews point to a number of important leadership issues. Are the issues raised symptomatic of a general lack of directed leadership from the top, or are they due to a lack of leadership and action at middle management level? It is clear that some of the issues raised are related to resources, staff time and training.

Question: “What leadership issues come to mind in developing e-learning?”

Exhibit 2

Time and leadership in my sector are needed for further development.
Our management team from the Assistant Director down have little or no experience of ICT as a learning tool.
The future of work-based learning is very dependent on e-learning and the college could lose business if development is not progressed with adequate support.
Many staff in the area have completed training on a number of e-learning/ICT tools. Unfortunately, the lack of availability of these tools in many of the classrooms in my area means that tutors are not able to put this training into practice for the benefit of learners.
There is insufficient space and capacity in IT suite and a frequent lack of technical support and consumables. There are very limited training resources for staff and students. WebCT is difficult to navigate and adapt for tutors. In my area, there is a need to train all staff to at least become competent with email. This would solve a lot of the communication issues that make running a geographically diverse area challenging. We need to consider the use of WiFi technology in all our buildings linked to the availability of mobile technology. This would make an amazing difference to the way we work.

Question: “Can you provide examples of leadership success in e-learning?”

Exhibit 3

A notable example is that I recently have had a member of staff on specialist training with the supplying company to learn the new LECTRA specialist professional Fashion/Textiles computer system that we purchased. It is planned to fully embed this into the curriculum in the next academic year.

BA Hons Early Childhood Studies (part-time route) is all blended learning and heavily dependent on e-learning.

Launch of a distance learning Foundation degree in International Trade.

We have run the Skills for Life e-learning programme in conjunction with an external consultant. Members of the group taking the programme produced a CD-ROM that was presented to the Essential Skills sub-group.

The development of WebCT and transition to a VLE. Initially for hospitality and tourism before expanding across the programme learning area.

Staff in FE Computing have all had training on using WebCT and encouraged to develop their resources to be uploaded onto WebCT. Synergy materials have been bought in to encourage staff to use and develop and staff have been introduced to FENC materials.

The reverse argument can be given with respect to this last set of answers. There seem to be success stories here, but who (if anyone) should receive credit for this? Are these initiatives the result of clear top-down decision making at executive level? Are they the result of facilitative, distributed or empowered leadership? Or are they the result of the work of individual enthusiasts? Of course, it may be due to a contribution from each.

Few, if any, of the examples referred to seem to have been generated by executive action from the top. Indeed there is some doubt as to whether members of the executive really understand the complexities, technological opportunities, or the implementation strategies needed to embed e-learning across the college.

Successfully, an interesting issue here is that the subculture within an organisation can have a stronger association with commitment than the wider organisational culture (Lok and Crawford, 1999). Hence, if a department or sector of a college has a supportive subculture with strong leadership, this could override anxieties with the wider college directed or bureaucratic culture.

Findings and Discussion from Participant Observation

The research findings in this section are focussed on the researcher and members of a task group established by the researcher to address e-learning benchmarking over a six-month period. The researcher was able to identify these elements of leadership through an in-depth interview with a consultant who attended each of the six meetings. The consultant who chaired the group noted that the researcher exhibited many of the characteristics of a facilitative style of leadership, although elements of distributed and empowered leadership were also noticed.

As indicated in our literature review, according to Cufaude (2004) there are six facilitative leadership fundamentals that have to be applied for this process to work effectively. In Table 2 we have summarised the key elements of each approach, and then provided an example of how facilitative leadership has been observed in our meetings. These observations were taken from contemporaneous notes, analysis of the task group web log, and an interview with our consultant.
What was clear in reviewing the leader in interaction with the task group above is how the continuum of intervention (Figure 2) was evident. The skill of the leader in this situation was in using gentle, ... all find our own ways to learn, adjust, observe, interact, persuade, support and encourage others within group situations.

Conclusions

The research suggests that there are situations with groups of professionals where facilitative, distributed or empowered styles of leadership were highly effective (for example with middle managers), but that in other situations with different groups (for example, where executive decision making took place) a more directive style of leadership was evident. In the latter case, rule-based behaviour and a more command and control style was evident to transform desired policies into reality. The leadership processes driving change in the priority areas at a pedagogical level are a mixture of facilitative, distributed and empowered leadership, whereas key decisions regarding infrastructure, policy and resources are made at an executive level and represent more directed forms of decision making. This is represented in figure 3 below:

Table 2: Facilitative Fundamentals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fundamentals</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Examples observed</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Facilitative leaders make connections and help others make meaning.</td>
<td>Making connections between different elements of the organisations, e.g. recruitment, funding, new approaches to teaching and learning. These leaders use their skills to work with others to produce synergy, ensuring all members of the group fully understand the context of the situation they are in.</td>
<td>The Task Group was faced with a complex set of problems. The leader clarified a shared purpose and helped define roles and responsibilities for the group. Leadership intervention at this stage allowed time for reflection and clarification.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Facilitative leaders provide direction without totally taking the reins.</td>
<td>Within a task group or team, each individual must take some responsibility for action and be concerned for the group as a whole. There must be ‘ownership’ of the problem or task. The facilitative leader must therefore provide initial direction, but must then “lead from behind” so that others take on lead roles.</td>
<td>Early in the life of the group the leader “led from the front” in order to provide guidelines and direction. The leader ensured that each member had a specific task or role, and was then able to “lead from behind” as responsibilities were taken.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Facilitative leaders balance managing content and process.</td>
<td>The process of making decision in groups and debating sometimes contentious issues can often be critical. The tone that is set, and the degree of freedom afforded will often determine group success. A facilitative leader will establish an equitable process for discussion as well as ensuring progress on what the group discusses.</td>
<td>The leader adopted an informal style that allowed the personalities of each member to be expressed. However, there were times when the leader had to use a more forceful style to ensure that progress was made.</td>
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<td>4. Facilitative leaders invite disclosure and feedback to help surface unacknowledged or invisible beliefs, thoughts and patterns.</td>
<td>It is important that groups work openly and honestly and avoid hidden agendas. Sometimes relationships within the group will need attending to. The facilitative leader will ensure communication takes place in an open and non-threatening manner.</td>
<td>The leader was aware of the different personalities in the group and used open systems of communications to ensure all members were able to contribute.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Facilitative leaders focus on building the capacity of individuals and groups to accomplish more on their own, now and in the future.</td>
<td>This is about helping individuals and teams learn together. The leader must not assume too much responsibility as eventually the group and the individuals within it, should operate successfully on their own; the leader should exploit the strengths of individual members.</td>
<td>The leader tends to take on too many responsibilities, and there comes a point when he had to “let go” and trust others to function independently. As the group matured he felt confident to delegate more.</td>
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<td>6. Facilitative leaders operate from a position of restraint.</td>
<td>Avoiding ‘heroic’ responsibilities is sometimes difficult for the leader. Often it is necessary to demonstrate restraint so as to maximise the contributions from others. This facilitative leader carefully selects how to intervene, when to intervene, and at what level.</td>
<td>The leader adopted an ‘heroic’ stance early on in order to establish a foundation for the task group. However, he sensed this was alienating the group, and adopted a more restrained position drawing upon the strengths of each member.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Level of Management</th>
<th>Management Style</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Top Management:</td>
<td>Mainly directed &amp; hierarchical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Directors (n=5) and Assistant Directors (n=7) together form the ‘Leadership Group’.</td>
<td>Set performance targets, control resources, lead on policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Management:</td>
<td>Mainly facilitative and distributed styles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programme Managers (n=23)</td>
<td>Programme managers responsible for performance targets, retention, achievement and quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Tier Management:</td>
<td>Mainly facilitative and distributed styles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum Team Leaders (n=32), other support managers, including Course Tutors.</td>
<td>Curriculum Team Leaders responsible for a suite of courses Little evidence of directed or hierarchical style due to close bond with tutors.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Our research suggests that there are two distinct approaches to leadership within the college. The first, at executive director level demonstrates a strong directed and hierarchical style with all the attributes of Taylorism. Examples of this included:

- Decisions about laptops replacing desktop PCs.
- Decisions regarding the migration from the college VLE WebCT to Moodle.
- Decisions regarding the withdrawal of all office printers in favour of printing “hubs” located in different parts of a building.
- Announcements on new pedagogy in new build environments.
- Migration to a new college internet design.

In all the above cases a more facilitative style involving focus groups and discussion with key stakeholders might have produced better stakeholder buy-in as well as a greater understanding of the rationale for change, and the problems involved. Assistant directors (ADs) within the leadership group are in a more complex position as they have to develop sound working relations with programme managers (PMs). There was also evidence of some ADs establishing excellent working relationships with curriculum team leaders (CTLs), course tutors and tutors, and utilising distributed and empowered styles of leadership. Historically, prior to internal re-organisation within the college, ADs were heads of departments and had developed close bonds with members of their department team.

At middle management level the situation is more complex. PMs represent the focus for the deliver of results, meeting targets, and the timetabling of staff. On the one hand, they need to work closely with CTLs, course tutors and tutors, where a facilitative or distributed style would be most appropriate. Yet, on the other hand, they sometimes need to deploy a more forceful style to ensure targets are met and quality is assured. PMs also have key responsibilities in delivering results and meeting challenging targets. Our research indicates that PMs either tend towards a directive/authoritative style or a facilitative/distributed style (Figure 1). We saw in the literature review that facilitative leadership assumes that the leader is able to adapt her/his personality according to the prevailing circumstances, and that this should be done with authenticity, integrity and honesty. How they lead their programme areas depends of the changing and challenging contest and day-to-day operations. Similarly, Barker (2007) demonstrated how middle managers had to adapt between a complex variety of roles (go-between role, authority role, management role, leadership role) and that this required a complex set of personal skills.

At the lower tiers of management (CTLs and course tutors), it was evident that the leadership style was predominantly distributed and facilitative, for example, establishing and maintaining cross-functional teams of tutors and leadership intervention. CTLs normally had close relationships with tutors, and hence the leadership style was generally gentle and persuasive. Distributed leadership was also evident, e.g. Making sense of complex social interactions and interactions with the environment. The emphasis on leadership style can be summarised in Figure 4:

**Figure 4**

**Management Hierarchy**

- Executive Directors
- Assistant Directors
- Programme Managers
- Curriculum Team Leaders
- Course Tutors
- Tutors

The “managerial and directed” triangle represents the decreasing use of this approach to leadership as one moves down the management hierarchy. The blue triangle represents the increased emphasis on facilitative, distributed and empowered styles of leadership as one moves to the bottom of the management hierarchy. However, there will be exceptions to this model, and some PMs were found to have a significantly higher place on the managerial/directed continuum than others.

It was also evident in our interviews with some senior managers who had particular expertise and had forged strong bonds with members of the executive directorate, that they were able to instigate new systems, procedures and policy with the minimum of consultation. They had been empowered to get on with the job. Once empowered to act however, the leadership style was very managerial, based upon strict financial control, efficient use of resources, and tight project planning.

Implementation of the imperatives and priorities are complex processes. One would think that there is a clear need for ownership of the priorities, and an implementation plan that fits with the college’s learning, teaching and assessment strategy as well as the e-learning strategy. Yet, a number of these priorities are in the process of being implemented almost by accident, through the initiatives of a few middle managers operating in an entrepreneurial manner and gaining funding to kick-start initiatives.
This demonstrates that in any organisation individual entrepreneurs who have been empowered to follow their own initiatives can create situations that result in significant change. The study by Herig and Jimmieson (2006) of 40 middle managers supports the view that middle managers play a pivotal role in change, including assisting employees in the change transition. The above example sits well with empowered leadership theory, yet there is no evidence that executive management adopted this strategy in this case.

In summary, our research suggests that a complex mix of leadership styles exists in the case study college, ranging from directed and managerialist at one end, to facilitative, distributed and empowered at the other. At executive director level, there may well be circumstances where a top-down and rule based leadership style is appropriate (where the organisation is in danger of failing for example). However there are dilemmas in this approach, and that is the emotional and motivational impact on others, alongside the hampering of variety, diversity and individual entrepreneurship at different levels within the organisations. Further research is needed to test some of the issues raised in this short case-study. It would be interesting, for example, to carry out a comparative study on exactly how aspects of facilitative, distributed and empowered leadership raised in this research might be observed in other colleges. What aspects of “managerial leadership” might be observed at different levels in the organisations? Are there distinct leadership processes observable in colleges moving through turbulent and transformational change?

**Recommendations**

The following recommendations are made to assist principals and executive directors in their formulation of a leadership framework that encourages all members of the organisation to achieve their maximum potential:

- Create an environment where middle managers are supported as change agents.
- Invest in leadership education and training, particularly for middle managers.
- Prioritise training for skills development in the use of learning technologies across all sections of the college.
- Establish a reward system for leaders based on an agreed range of performance measures.
- Communicate more effectively, especially across different levels of leadership throughout the organisation.
- Establish greater opportunities for facilitative, distributed and empowered leadership throughout the organisation.
- Encourage, invest in and support entrepreneurial leaders.
- Identify and support innovative leaders in e-learning.

**Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Hugh Butcher who agreed to act as consultant to the project and who offered much needed advice and support. Thanks are also due to all those colleagues who participated in the survey as well as those who took part in the interview process.

**References**


Meeting the FE Leadership Challenge: Dynamic Markets, Employer Engagement, Risk and Innovation

Pauline Parrett and Michelle Lomax, Bury College

Executive Summary

This research report examines the capacity of a college, through effective leadership, to be responsive to employer needs. It addresses the current dynamic market situation for FE and the external impetus to change through government-determined strategy. Specific emphasis is given to the role of risk and innovation to enhance employer engagement. A survey of three teams explores the college’s utilisation of ideas and talents and provides indicators on staff awareness of internal and external change. Findings reveal that this college is well positioned to respond effectively to market requirements. The report provides clear indication of the requirement for continuous innovation and development, with specific focus on responsive and fluid structures and systems. Emphasis is placed on the critical role of people management, enhancing conditions for high employee commitment and performance and the endorsement of talent management to attract, retain and utilise the skills and knowledge of the workforce.

Introduction

A key aim of this project is to explore how FE colleges can respond to the needs of the wider market with specific reference to employer engagement. Critical to this study is an examination of the ability and readiness of FE colleges to take risks and innovate, to be continually and appropriately responsive. The impetus behind the project is to inform and develop better leadership and organisational practices that can support the systems which are developed through inclusive action to challenge constraints.

The project is influenced and informed by recent changes relevant to FE, with specific reference to the Leitch Review which encourages a focus on the move to a demand-led system and the need to explore a cross college approach to employer engagement. The Leitch Review recommends that publicly funded adult vocational programmes be channelled through demand-led routes by the year 2010, routing such training through Train to Gain and Learner Accounts. This provides a strong imperative for FE providers to deliver the skills required by employers and individuals in a flexible and responsive manner.

Recent government policy centres around expanding capacity for young people to achieve and continue in education until at least the age of 18 and an ambitious programme to increase the number of Skills Academies, Specialist Schools, new Sixth Forms and National Centres of Excellence in Skills, as well as sharing best services.
This in turn gives FE providers a very real incentive to deliver skills fully relevant to employers and individuals in a flexible and responsive manner. Leitch indicates that currently less than 10% of employer training is delivered by FE colleges. Reference is also made to the fact that unit costs of delivery for employer provision; qualifications delivered through “Train to Gain” and online, tend to be lower than those delivered by FE.

Taylor (2003) questions some underlying assumptions and public policy prescriptions in relation to future skills and innovation needs. The official emphasis is motivated by a determination to close the productivity gap between the UK and main competitors and the prime means of achieving this aim is through the development of a high skills/high performance economy. Taylor considers that no serious attempt has been made to relate the need to promote skills and innovation to the actual internal modernisation of companies and the way jobs are organised or restructured in existing and new workplaces. He considers that the reform of the workplace as a strategic mechanism to improve skills and innovation has received scant attention from British policy makers, arguing that the main approach has focused on, “The introduction of measures to enhance the volume and quality of skilled workers in the labour market outside the firm.” The current emphasis does have some similarity to that criticised by Taylor, but it is to be hoped that moves for increased employer involvement, customised to employer response (albeit via constrained pathways) may make some headway to the internal modernisation, urged by Taylor.

In the field of innovative strategy thinking, this research is informed by that of Chan and Mauborgne (2006). Their concepts of “Blue” and “Red Ocean thinking” relate to the marketing universe. Red oceans are existing markets where the rules are known, competition is strong and crowded and consequently profits and growth are reduced, whereas blue oceans relate to industries currently unknown, with consequent unknown market space and a clean sheet on competition, “In blue oceans, demand is created rather than fought over, and there is ample opportunity for growth” (Chan & Mauborgne 2006). They argue that those organisations which understand the drivers behind strategic developments are those that are well placed, “To create multiple blue oceans, delivering sustained high growth”. It is suggested that competing for a share of contracting markets is insufficient to sustain organisational performance and that, “Managers need to go beyond competing and create blue oceans. This requires a fundamentally different skills set”. The role of the HR function is seen as critical in the alignment of value, profit and people, “By building commitment, trust and voluntary co-operation into every level of the organisation”. Chan & Mauborgne uphold the following key leadership principles as essential to enable blue ocean strategy to flourish: the creation of a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship, building execution into strategy and enabling workers to go beyond the call of duty to execute strategies.

This report investigates how the Blue Ocean strategy can compliment and enhance the future FE agenda by helping to exploit existing demand and by creating and capturing new demand from the marketplace; to support managers in decision making and the provision of a sound but transformative business strategy.

Research Framework

The thrust of the Leitch Review has been to consider the UK’s long-term skills needs to enable the country to remain globally competitive. The Report draws a direct correlation between skills, productivity and employment. Leitch recommends a fully demand-led approach, with an end to supply-side provision with consequently adult skills funding being routed through Train to Gain and Learner Accounts by 2010.

This implies a need to align employer and FE planning to ensure that the skills and qualifications to meet the needs of the modern workplace are being provided. The introduction of employment underlines the importance this research has placed on the development of skills that need to be applied in the workplace to make them effective.

Simultaneously, government-driven LSC policy focuses on the streamlining provision from FE providers to concentrate more on curriculum areas of local growth and demand and therefore pace the inevitable change.

This research explores the significant move to a demand led system with specific emphasis on employer engagement and responsiveness. This involves consideration of the employer and adult market, but also considers in the wider sense how employer responsiveness relates to the 14-19 year old market. The key areas of research relate to those of managing change in the fast paced and demanding environment of FE, which at the present time is facing unprecedented rates of change; the perception of leaders in the College as to their current leadership and management abilities and their readiness and preparedness for future developments. Current issues and developments will be examined and their impact on the work and well being of the College.

The overarching research question is:

How through leadership can a large college be innovative in response to the needs of the changing market?

This involves investigating:

- How can an FE college become increasingly responsive to today’s competitive marketplace?
- What is the current capacity to innovate and take risks to meet and stimulate market needs and how can innovation be encouraged as part of a sustainability strategy?
- What is our leadership capacity to support the incremental changes and meet the needs of our internal and external stakeholders?
- How does employer engagement and responsiveness support and inform the future development of the College?

This practitioner research project was undertaken immediately following the publication of the findings of the Leitch Review and at a time when cuts had already been experienced in adult funding. These cuts had an immediate knock-on effect to services for the adult market and led to a decision to close two college-managed IT centres and to a reduction in the range of provision and funding of a number of adult-specific programmes.

This report investigates how the Blue Ocean strategy can compliment and enhance the future FE agenda by helping to exploit existing demand and by creating and capturing new demand from the marketplace; to support managers in decision making and the provision of a sound but transformative business strategy.
It is of interest to consider how this type of innovative strategy correlates with the findings of the Leitch Review with the recommended call for a simplified demand led system with employers and individuals having a strong and coherent voice.

In relation to innovation, Hamel (2002) encourages the essentials of big thinking, stepping outside the box and seeing the wider, grander picture. With specific relevance to the education sector he comments: “A business school that sees its mission as granting degrees to residential students, rather than addressing the world’s ‘management deficit’ will have little incentive for business concept innovation.” Useful guidance for innovation in the FE world. Hamel discusses the reinvestment in research and development and argues that efforts should be devoted to reinventing existing business concepts, as well as inventing new ones, citing situations where capital budgets are cut proportionately if managers fail to come up with projects which challenge conventional thinking. However, “In the end, it is imagination, not investment, that drives innovation” (Hamel 2002).

**Research Methods**

**Semi-Structured Interviews**

In order to investigate the overarching research question – How through leadership can a large college be innovative in response to the needs of the changing market? - three curriculum areas were chosen that had an employer engagement agenda, faced recent change or history of transformation. Research activities comprised an analysis of related background information, individual semi-structured interviews, a survey of three curriculum teams and a focus group with senior and middle managers. Responses from interviews were analysed in relation to the research questions and were compared and contrasted with the responses of three teams of staff participating in the survey.

Nine leaders representing five organisational levels were identified as suitable candidates; the Chair of the Board Governors and the Principal, two further members of the SMT, three curriculum managers, one programme manager and one Co/VE manager. The interviews were divided into four discussion areas related to the key research themes under investigation: (1) the changing market, (2) risk and innovation, (3) employer engagement and (4) leadership and management. The research had full organisational support, and interviewees appeared to be willing participants in the study.

To encourage the flow of information, interviewees were given a full explanation of the background and research aims of the project. The interviewers discussed the benefits of the research project for the organisation, to ensure participants were informed of the importance of their contribution. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed to ensure the reliability of the data. To promote an open discussion, interviewees were reassured that comments which could be interpreted negatively, would be used to inform and improve future practices as opposed to being disclosed to parties without a reason of improvement.

Once the interviewees were identified, each interviewer was paired with a suitable interviewee. Factors which impacted on this decision included working relationship and past contact. There was a mix of relationships between each researcher and their interviewees; the variety of close and distant working relationships did not seem to impact on the quality and quantity of information gained. The researchers’ experience of interviewing and ability to build rapport explains the rich flow of information.

**Survey Questionnaire**

The survey method of investigation tends to be perceived as an economical and effective way of ascertaining large quantities of information (Saunders et al 2000). It was decided that a questionnaire should be administered so that the perceptions of leaders could be compared/contrasted with those of their staff. A one-page questionnaire containing a 5-point Likert scale was chosen as the most effective way to ascertain staff opinions on leadership topics; ideas, talents, knowledge & skills and change management. Statements contained everyday language and did not include any jargon or confusing terminology. The Likert scale was also chosen to ensure respondents could complete the questionnaire quickly and were not discouraged by open questions. It was felt that it was ethically questionable to ask respondents to comment directly on their manager’s leadership style, as respondents may perceive a conflict of interest.

After gaining the managers’ consent, the questionnaire was delivered directly to each member via the internal post system. Before questionnaires were distributed, an informational e-mail was sent to potential respondents explaining the purpose of the research and to try to elicit buy-in. The introductory paragraph on the questionnaire/coversheet documentation stated that responses were confidential and that anonymity was guaranteed; to ensure respondents gave informed consent to take part in the research. Questionnaire respondents could choose whether they wished to participate in the research. It was anticipated that the good relationship between researchers and their colleagues would impact positively on the response rate. In total, 105 members of staff received a questionnaire and of those, 55 completed the survey giving an average response rate of 52%.

**Focus Group**

A one-hour focus group was arranged with 25 senior and middle managers to enable high-level managers to contribute to the research. The focus group was aptly scheduled; the previous management development session had examined diversity in relation to the changing market to enable and visualise a college of the future. It was seen as good timing to enable managers to contribute openly to the research, ideas were flowing and reflective practice was set in motion.

A series of written statements were given to managers as a means to set the scene. These statements were followed by a table in which managers were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 = poor average, good and 4 = excellent) the College’s capacity to take risk and innovate, take staff through change, develop new products, develop and
The advice of LSC officials was emphatic – colleges need to be responsive, fast on their feet to react, but also to contract; very much a move from a whole college response to a much more focused response – potentially becoming a college of three parts indicated above.

The Chair of Governors emphasized the challenges of Foster and Leitch pressuring colleges to listen to employers and provide exactly what they want. The impact of funding changes for adult provision ... year (giving an impression of downsizing), yet in reality being a focused business response to meet government priorities.

The changing funding situation is inevitably increasing the contestability quotient, particularly in relation to external competitors. Internal contestability has increased; this may well be a natural bi-product of an organization gearing up to market responsiveness; yet at the same time indicating the need for clear systems, structures and processes which support a streamlined response to customers and mechanisms to enhance cross-organisational communication and co-operation. One senior manager remarked that the time was now crucial for curriculum managers to raise awareness of their provision (cross college and externally) and to develop strategies to meet the emerging changes. The current offer of this College is very much in tune with government and LSC agenda, with provision encompassing Train to Gain, Apprenticeships, lead provider in a bid to offer specialised diplomas, full level 2, full level 3, Skills for Life; these initiatives and programmes being seen as key to how the College markets and positions itself for the future.

Operating since 2000, the College employer engagement unit fulfills a key role as a tangible professional interface between the organisation and the business community; working closely with individual companies to identify training needs. In relation to these increasingly dynamic market conditions, the Principal outlined a perspective of three types of directives, each requiring differing responses from the College.

2. Employer facing market – including work-based learning, Train to Gain and bespoke commercial provision.
3. The individual learner market seeking access to specific provision for career/self development.

“The outdated mode of the FE college as a ‘lumbering oil tanker’ transforming to a streamlined, focused, segmented model with excellent customer focus, superb financial planning, clear communication and accountability and superlative management is deemed essential for the new era.” (Principal, 2007)

Research Findings

It was evident through government and LSC directives that incremental changes were planned which would have vast impact on the future role and practices of FE colleges. The government desire to open up the market, the consequent routing of public adult education funding through the Train to Gain scheme (focusing on the training needs of business) and Learner Accounts (learners collect credits to spend with an accredited learning provider) introduces radical changes into adult education funding.

The introduction of compulsory competitive tendering for large segments of activity enables different players to enter the frame.

This dynamic situation undoubtedly calls for FE colleges to provide a highly business focused and polished response, as the Principal of the case study college observed.

In relation to this, the Principal stated that the College is seeing an increasingly diverse range of employers, with each requiring differing responses from the College.

2. Employer facing market – including work-based learning, Train to Gain and bespoke commercial provision.
3. The individual learner market seeking access to specific provision for career/self development.

There is widespread awareness that in order to meet the employer engagement agenda, relevant activity needs to be developed across the full provision in order for the college to grow or maintain its current size. Additionally, those products must be packaged in a way that is attractive to employers i.e. bespoke and tailored products to meet employer need – a simple example being customising delivery materials to employer specification incorporating employer imagery and logos. Increased awareness and openness to employer-focused development was evidenced in curriculum manager interviews, as one interviewee stated, “all curriculum areas need to buy into the concept of employer engagement. It should feed into everything we do.”

The Chair of Governors emphasized the challenges of Foster and Leitch pressuring colleges to listen to employers and provide exactly what they want. The impact of funding changes for adult provision provides a highly prescriptive model, which is not necessarily what employers or individual learners may want. This is illustrated by the College’s closure of two IT Centres last year (giving an impression of downsizing), yet in reality being a focused business response to meet government priorities.

The changing funding situation is inevitably increasing the contestability quotient, particularly in relation to external competitors. Internal contestability has increased; this may well be a natural bi-product of an organization gearing up to market responsiveness; yet at the same time indicating the need for clear systems, structures and processes which support a streamlined response to customers and mechanisms to enhance cross-organisational communication and co-operation. One senior manager remarked that the time was now crucial for curriculum managers to raise awareness of their provision (cross college and externally) and to develop strategies to meet the emerging changes. The current offer of this College is very much in tune with government and LSC agenda, with provision encompassing Train to Gain, Apprenticeships, lead provider in a bid to offer specialised diplomas, full level 2, full level 3, Skills for Life; these initiatives and programmes being seen as key to how the College markets and positions itself for the future.
Overcome barriers,

Leadership capability.

The bulk of responses across all categories fell into the good/excellent categories with 30% of respondents considering that capacity to develop and maintain markets was excellent and 25% rating capacity to develop new products as excellent. A key response from the group was that capacity to risk take and innovate be considered as separate categories - as conditions within the FE sector mitigated against risk-taking; yet our ability and attitudes to innovate were very positive. This resulted in a negative skewed response on risk taking/innovation category – with 59% rating capacity as good or excellent and 30% as average. Closing feedback from the group included the following:

A request for a ‘Risk and Innovation Budget’ to enable managers and teams to pursue new and innovative markets, whilst maintaining and building their existing markets.

A request to raise the threshold of acceptable riskiness – and to be able to sell the benefits to the teams.

A desire for enhanced abilities to develop autonomy, products, services and trust.

To further develop pro-active systems and practices.

To engage more actively in sharing knowledge and experiences both cross college and with other institutions. (See Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: produced by Focus Group members to visualise their perspective.
Manager interviews revealed considerable awareness, reflective thought and ideas on the concepts of risk and innovation. Risk aversion was spoken about in a number of interviews with emphasis placed on approaching risk taking from a business perspective, using relevant business tools and methodologies. "Calculating risk allows you to be more innovative – risk and innovation go hand in hand; if an initiative is too high risk, it is not innovative, but foolish" (Senior Manager).

During recent months, the College has utilised and developed sophisticated risk management tools to inform decision making on the local market, with particular reference to competitor analysis regarding the 14-19 market segment. These tools have the potential to adapt and develop to support interpretation of risk on a range of current and potential markets and adoption by college managers as a key tool to support innovative development. Arguing that "Companies don't need more risk takers; they need people who understand how to de-risk big aspirations"; Hamel (2002) raises a concern that top management can be too distant to make an informed assessment on risk – too far from the customer. This view was echoed by interviewees who commented that those in the position to decide to take risks were too far away from the customers to have genuine understanding of the risks. Hamel also indicates a difference between actual risk as opposed to perceived risk, stating that the further you are from first person understanding of the opportunity, the greater the perceived risk. He encourages the development of a portfolio of options; lots of small bets and appeals for organisations to "accelerate learning, celebrate the pathfinders" – the ethos of low risk experimentation. The work of the College's employer engagement arm further reflects Hamel's views on "small bets", as interviewees reported that here there was less scrutiny to develop new products and services than in mainstream areas.

It was identified that differential practices operate across the College to support innovation. Designated employer engagement areas have increased means to be innovatory with enhanced autonomy to risk take and innovate; a proportion of profit is ploughed back and used to pilot and trial new ideas; this is viewed as healthy re-investment. A number of quality products have been developed in this manner. Similarly, the use of projects enables innovation and development to meet identified business need – e.g. a highly innovative people management network was set up via ERDF funding to support best people management practices and enable SME productivity. In contrast, an interviewee based in a mainstream curriculum area stated "There is currently no link between income generated and monies ploughed back in."

There is scope for further development in cross-organisational links between the employer engagement arm and other areas; interviewees reported a conflict of interest due to the impetus for college-wide curriculum managers effectively competing for employer business. Interviewees urged a joined-up approach to employer engagement and the development of an Employer Liaison Group and Employer Liaison Officers to share and collaborate.

The college has demonstrated its own commitment and success with innovatory developments, effectively illustrated by the success of the employer engagement arm, which has developed from 3 to 40 staff within seven years, supporting business training and development initiatives through the means of commercial, ERDF, ESF and Train to Gain initiatives.

The leadership capabilities to enable risk, innovation and development are likely to be variable across the organisation. These capabilities are likely to include the leader's capacity and openness to share and embed the vision with their teams, to engage staff on the journey of development that innovation inevitably demands.

It was acknowledged that systems and procedures inform risk, yet can mitigate against innovation - rigorous procedures i.e. approving new courses, serve to inform yet at the same time can act as a barrier to innovation. Likewise, re-investment of profit in traditional curriculum areas was not the norm; but would be very much welcomed, as one interviewee stated, "particularly as a basket of hours for new course development". This would further incentivise and motivate staff if they could see a direct link between success and reinvestment. It was also acknowledged that the converse must hold true and the consequences of loss be prepared to be met.

Leadership and Management

It is interesting to reflect on a college's leadership responses to the current and future changes, particularly bearing in mind Leitch's own emphasis on the crucial nature of leadership and management as a prerequisite to improving business performance in the UK. As indicators for future success in college leadership, capacity to meet the changing demands of the new dynamic markets, the following key performance indicators were cited by the Principal:

- Clean bill of health,
- Highly responsive,
- Highly customer focused – with all staff enabled to act as ambassadors and sales personnel, signposting to any area of the College – customer care kitemark,
- Discretionary behaviour – going the extra mile and being fully student / customer centred,
- Development of all staff (IP),
- Strong financial management,
- Excellent quality,
- Excellent communication,
- Excellent market information,
- Employer focused and responsive,
- Environmentally aware.
People resourcing is, and will be paramount, with a need to recruit effectively and speedily to meet successful tenders and manage a potentially increasing peripheral workforce. The employer engagement arm of the college have worked with this employment situation for some time, with a significant proportion of the workforce on fixed term and temporary contracts – “My biggest challenge is how to manage staff on temporary contracts, as staff understandably become anxious and de-moralised” (manager). The imperative to retain and build quality with the reality of temporary employment can be precarious and is contrary to one of Pfeffer’s best people management policies of “emphasising employment security”.

Questionnaire Survey

Questionnaires were distributed to 105 members of staff with 55 completed questionnaires returned (52%). Respondents demonstrated a fairly even spread in terms of years of service, ranging from 0-2 year to over 10 years service. The questionnaire results revealed predominantly positive responses in the ideas and talents section, with a reduced number of positive respondents in the change management section, but with responses still more positive than negative.

Ideas

Figure 2 (below) illustrates responses to statements in the ideas section of the questionnaire. A largely positive response was gathered - 95% of respondents responding positively to the statement “I feel I am encouraged to contribute my ideas”, with 43% of respondents strongly agreeing with this statement. 69% of respondents responded positively when asked if their ideas were appreciated, 36% agreed strongly. In terms of response to “my contribution is acknowledged”, 89% were positive, of whom 36% “agreed” and 20% “agreed to some extent”, compared to 32% “strongly agreed”. 90% of respondents agreed that they were “able to implement my ideas, with support of team &/or manager”.

The findings suggested some areas had a greater competitive edge than others in terms of expansion, growth and development which could potentially be attributed to managers and teams having a strong employer/industry focus with exposure to recent industrial practice and experience. The challenge of transferring this expertise of market success and industrial awareness to other areas has potential to be achieved through a variety of best practice mechanisms including knowledge sharing forums, CPD supporting systems, Development Day activities, coaching and mentoring, etc.

Two leaders in this study, both with a strong employer engagement ethos, engage with employers in very different ways i.e. by providing bespoke business service solutions to employers (customised training etc) compared with enabling employer links to inform the curriculum and enhance the student experience (e.g. industry experience, keynote speakers). One manager is responsive to employers and provides services to them, whereas the other works with employers to provide a better service to college students and ultimately to prepare them for the world of employment. Both mechanisms are highly successful; however their interactivity is currently limited, offering great potential for synergy to stimulate further developments and links. Colleges must harness the leadership qualities and related capacity to innovate in these areas to enable a fully joined up response to employer’s specific needs (working both for and with employers).

The questionnaire responses discussed below compliments the dialogue of interviewees relating to the leadership skills deployed. The questionnaire sought feedback relevant to leadership in terms of employee involvement, talent management and communication and consultation. The majority of respondents agreed (to varying extent) with the questionnaire statements, demonstrating correlation between the leader and employee perception. Commonalities evident from interviews of apparent effective leaders included:

- Industry background,
- Run the area like a business,
- Actively listening and pursuing each idea,
- Open, honest and clear communication with staff,
- Genuine interest in staff – knowledge of strengths, expertise and feelings,
- Delegates and empowers staff – ownership in decisions.

The People Management Dimension

The College Principal and senior management acknowledge the increasing significance and prominence of human resource management to support the current and future changes, less articulated by Leitch. CPDO encompass these requirements in the term “high-performance working”, utilising people management practices to create conditions for a high level of employee commitment and performance and making best use of the skills base.
Talents, Knowledge and Skills

Figure 3 (below) illustrates responses to the ideas section of the questionnaire. 89% of respondents agree (to varying extents) that their talents/knowledge/skills are usefully employed. 36% of respondents responded positively when asked if they felt encouraged to develop their knowledge. Responses relevant to utilisation of staff talents, knowledge and skills were largely positive. Responses in the “strongly agreed” category were less in the talents section than in the ideas section - 30% compared to 47% - indicating scope for college leadership to give more emphasis to talent utilisation and skills/knowledge development.

Change Management

Figure 4 (below) illustrates responses to the final section of the questionnaire relating to change. On the whole, the responses are still largely positive with few respondents choosing disagree/strongly disagree. However, there is a significant shift away from tendencies to strongly agree or agree as received in the ideas and talent section. The majority of respondents in the change section have opted for ‘agree to some extent’. In response to the statement “I am supported through change”, 20% of respondents ‘strongly agreed’, 30% agreed, and the majority of respondents (36%) agreed to some extent. The question which generated the most notable negative response was, “I am kept sufficiently informed when changes take place”; 21% disagreed they were kept sufficiently informed and 5% strongly disagreed. However, the majority of respondents were positive, with 40% in agreement. This indicates an area for development and indeed has been previously acknowledged within the college’s plans to provide development specific to “Change Management”.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Business models are becoming more fluid; organisations are finding it impossible to keep “built to last” strategies. ... a buoyant organisation responsive to the dynamic market, successful colleges need to create high performance workplaces.

This college has a history of successful innovation and its leaders have repeatedly shown commitment to new initiatives ranging from the development of CoVEs, bidding and successful achievement on a wide range of project funded activities. In the current dynamic environment, this college is well poised and receptive to innovation, which is supported by primary research findings. The findings have also served to
highlight some restraints and tensions which management demonstrate a willingness to overcome and progress. Risk actuality and perception are not necessarily the same thing and increased autonomy and ownership at lower hierarchical levels could facilitate this. More widespread allocation of reinvestment should enable innovation organisation-wide and tap into the wealth of ideas available.

If we accept that the change to a more demand-led system in FE is inevitable, then the college’s capacity to innovate is imperative in our mission to satisfy our markets. However, the paradox is that restrictions in funding lead to greater caution in reinvestment in research and development. With the imperative for blue ocean and red ocean success, college leadership must be ambassadorial in their efforts to change, innovate and to "de-risk big aspirations" (Hamel 2002). The foregoing examples of leadership best practice should be employed throughout the college to enable and facilitate innovation on smaller internal scales. When successes are shared, this will inevitably lead to other leaders and teams becoming more responsive to innovation and change. Innovation on a small level in small teams can be piloted, and where successful rolled out on a larger organisational scale. This type of innovation sharing has previously been highly successful as part of the college’s information learning technology strategy, where managers and teams have demonstrated their developments and products at regular showcase events.

A key recommendation of this research project is the full alignment of customer service to the organisational strategy and to develop and implement customer service development to enable enhanced customer focus throughout the organisation. The establishment of “Quality Working Groups” to assess and review flexibility of internal systems is recommended. A similar model has been used previously – bringing together user and supplier in a task group to aid system development and problem resolution.

It is imperative to review and further develop a fully integrated, comprehensive and coherent Employer Engagement Strategy, which is understood, embraced and applied across every area of the college (including the embedding of "industrial updating" in all areas, underpinned by linkages to the relevant sector skills councils). A critical aspect of employer responsiveness must be the implementation of a customer relationship management database accessed by all areas of the college.

Acknowledgments

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References


Pursuing Excellence Through a Theory of Change Approach: A Skills for Life Case Study

Ian Hunter, Gateshead Skills for Life Partnership and Simon Penhall, Helme park Ltd

Executive Summary
This project was designed to assess whether a Theory of Change approach to strategic planning would support the Skills for Life Partnership’s pursuit of excellence. Theory of Change is an innovative and rigorous approach to planning and evaluation. The research found that more effective collaborative leadership is an outcome from undertaking a Theory of Change approach to strategic planning as it empowers partner representatives to commit resources to the achievement of a shared long-term goal. It achieves this through a transparent and participatory planning process that is structured and rigorous, enabling the group to develop trust and a shared understanding. Theory of Change had a positive impact on five of the six principles that previous research has shown as defining effective partnership working. The most significant impact of Theory of Change was to challenge the suggestion that partnership excellence is an aggregation of the individual excellence approaches and that no added value comes from dealing with excellence at a partnership level. This report concludes that Theory of Change was a structured and robust planning methodology that supports partnerships in becoming more strategic and addressing the pursuit of excellence as a partnership issue.

Introduction
This research project is set within the context of the Government’s strategies for 14-19 and skills, which depends on the radical reforms in the White Paper, Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances. At the heart of the reforms is the drive for improvement - that is, the pursuit of excellence. The Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) document Pursuing Excellence sets out an outline improvement strategy with a vision of an excellent learning and skills sector that is effectively led, fully responsive to the needs of learners, employers and communities and committed to self-improvement through rigorous and challenging self-assessment. In addition to the vision, the improvement strategy sets out four principles which are deemed to be fundamentals to the success of the strategy:

- Partnership – no organisation can succeed alone.
- Enterprising leadership – no organisation can improve without a lead from the top.
- Self-improvement – no external organisation can impose improvement.
- Excellence – no organisation should settle for the average.

The Skills for Life Partnership has made a collective commitment to its own pursuit of excellence and recognises the need to embed the four Pursuing Excellence principles in the leadership and management of its operation. In its own pursuit of excellence, the partnership is mindful of the issues and challenges that are identified by ALI in assessing the performance of the sector. Over the first four-year period of inspections by ALI the vast majority of providers who were found to offer inadequate provision had less than satisfactory leadership and management. The common inspection weaknesses included issues relating to strategy and leadership, business planning and monitoring, and the use of targets.

In reviewing its strategic processes, the Skills for Life Partnership identified a range of leadership challenges to be addressed and undertook research to identify innovative practice that will allow them to respond positively to these challenges. This research identified Theory of Change as an innovative methodology that has been successful in supporting the leadership of complex community initiatives in the USA to improve the focus and quality of service provision and which was potentially translatable to a UK context. To test this assumption, the Partnership considered that an action research exercise undertaken as part of their strategic planning process would provide them with an understanding of whether a Theory of Change approach would meet their priorities.

The purpose of the research project was therefore to assess whether a Theory of Change approach to strategic planning would support the Skills for Life Partnership’s pursuit of excellence in a way that provided added value, supported the underpinning principles set out in the QIA Pursuing Excellence consultation document, and builds capacity and capability.

Research Framework
The literature is reviewed under five main headings - Leadership, Partnerships and Leadership, Collaborative Leadership, Excellence, and Theory of Change (a much more detailed literature review is available in the submitted final report of this project).

Leadership
A review of the leadership literature reveals an evolving pattern of thinking from “Great Man” and “Trait” theories to “Transformational” leadership (Bolton et al. 2003). Whilst early theories tend to focus upon the characteristics and behaviours of successful leaders, subsequent theories begin to consider the role of followers and the contextual nature of leadership. Many of these theories take a rather individualistic perspective of the leader, although a notion currently gaining recognition is that of “dispersed” leadership. This approach, with its foundations in sociology, psychology and politics rather than management science, views leadership as a process that is diffuse throughout an organisation rather than lying solely with the formally designated leader. The emphasis thus shifts from developing leaders to developing “leaderful” organisations or partnerships in the context of this research, with a collective responsibility for leadership.
**Partnerships and Leadership**

Working with others in partnership to deliver both individual and jointly agreed outcomes is now a core requirement in delivering effective public services (Hardy et al 2003). In recognition of this, the Strategic Partnership Taskforce of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister commissioned the Nuffield Institute at the University of Leeds to provide a methodology that local authorities could use to assess partnership relationships and aid the achievement of successful partnership working.

A detailed examination of the literature highlights that there has been considerable attention paid to partnerships, drawing on a number of areas of government policy, including the development of good practice guides on the attributes of a successful partnership, and a number of evaluations of partnership effectiveness (Stewart 2002). Stewart (1998) explored three perspectives - Facilitating, Co-ordinating, and Implementing partnerships. Facilitating partnerships have, as their primary role, the negotiation of contentious or politically sensitive issues and facilitation among partners with differing perspectives. Facilitating partnerships contrast with co-ordinating partnerships which relate primarily to the oversight, in both strategic and practical terms, of initiatives to which a wide range of organisations have committed themselves to make a contribution.

In terms of achieving successful collaboration, research on area-based initiatives (DTLR 2002) argues that there are five important dynamics in partnerships:

- **Where the political geography is clear -** boundaries are long established and it is easier to create the basis for collaboration at a strategic level.
- **It is easier to build collaboration where there is a sense of shared identity and common interest.**
- **While new initiatives assume a blank canvass, in reality each area is already shaped by the history of previous initiatives.**
- **The problems facing local agencies have changed over time, and their capacity to deal with them has changed.**
- **Personalties are crucial and collaborative working depends on the role of individuals.**

Common to all approaches to collaborative working is the notion of transaction costs. All modes of governance are deemed to involve transaction costs, but in terms of network modes of governance (typified by partnerships) the transaction costs include: the time expended in meeting, communicating and sharing. The burden of transaction costs under any mode of governance can be minimised if the parties know and trust each other.

Collaborative and partnership working might appear to diminish the importance of leadership, as partnership may involve the suppression of strong leadership in the interests of consensus building. However in practice, leadership is as necessary in collaborative ventures as in single organisational development. Thus “good leadership of a Local Strategic partnership would inspire vision, enthusiasm and commitment, and command the trust of other partners.” (DTLR 2001). In relation to regeneration partnerships, a threefold categorisation of leadership can be identified (Hambleton et al 2001):

- **Designed and focused leadership** provides a clear vision of future direction, a firm manifesto and a dedicated budget. The leader is high profile, imposes influence and leverage on others, relies on a ... election/appointment, derives authority from position, and is directly accountable to a constituency of followers.

- **Implied and fragmented leadership** provides a consensual (and often confused) view of direction, operates on an implicit rather than explicit forward plan and puts together packages of resources through joint funding arrangements. Leadership is virtually invisible, and depends on a team of secondees/temporary staff which has delegated and often shifting membership, derives authority from collective sanction, and is less transparently accountable.

- **Emergent and formative leadership** relies on implementation to shape policy, reflects pragmatism in developing future direction, uses adhoc resources to make progress, emphasises learning as the basis for further action, derives authority from getting things done and is accountable for what is done, not what is said.

The conclusion from practice is that designed and focused leadership, a more autonomous approach to leadership can be a strength for partnerships dependent on its style and representational ... concept of formative leadership confirms this view of the fragility of partnership to procure desired ends.

The tasks associated with leadership in partnership change according to the maturity of the relationships. The promotion of partnership working as an idea in order to create a culture in which partnerships ... carries the culture of partnership to the operational level of collaborative working and to the tasks of co-ordination.

An insight into the issues, challenges and opportunities for leadership in partnerships is provided by the I&DEA capacity framework (2004) which suggests that the leadership element of “Working in partnership” involves building “Positive relationships by making others feel valued, trusted, and by working collaboratively to achieve goals”. An effective leader “maintains calm and focus, recognises when to delegate or provide support and is able to take a long-term view in developing partnerships.”

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In a detailed examination of the literature highlights that there has been considerable attention paid to partnerships, drawing on a number of areas of government policy, including the development of good practice guides on the attributes of a successful partnership, and a number of evaluations of partnership effectiveness (Stewart 2002). Stewart (1998) explored three perspectives - Facilitating, Co-ordinating, and Implementing partnerships. Facilitating partnerships have, as their primary role, the negotiation of contentious or politically sensitive issues and facilitation among partners with differing perspectives. Facilitating partnerships contrast with co-ordinating partnerships which relate primarily to the oversight, in both strategic and practical terms, of initiatives to which a wide range of organisations have committed themselves to make a contribution.

In terms of achieving successful collaboration, research on area-based initiatives (DTLR 2002) argues that there are five important dynamics in partnerships:

- **Where the political geography is clear -** boundaries are long established and it is easier to create the basis for collaboration at a strategic level.
- **It is easier to build collaboration where there is a sense of shared identity and common interest.**
- **While new initiatives assume a blank canvass, in reality each area is already shaped by the history of previous initiatives.**
- **The problems facing local agencies have changed over time, and their capacity to deal with them has changed.**
- **Personalties are crucial and collaborative working depends on the role of individuals.**

Common to all approaches to collaborative working is the notion of transaction costs. All modes of governance are deemed to involve transaction costs, but in terms of network modes of governance (typified by partnerships) the transaction costs include: the time expended in meeting, communicating and sharing. The burden of transaction costs under any mode of governance can be minimised if the parties know and trust each other.

Collaborative and partnership working might appear to diminish the importance of leadership, as partnership may involve the suppression of strong leadership in the interests of consensus building. However in practice, leadership is as necessary in collaborative ventures as in single organisational development. Thus “good leadership of a Local Strategic partnership would inspire vision, enthusiasm and commitment, and command the trust of other partners.” (DTLR 2001). In relation to regeneration partnerships, a threefold categorisation of leadership can be identified (Hambleton et al 2001):

- **Designed and focused leadership** provides a clear vision of future direction, a firm manifesto and a dedicated budget. The leader is high profile, imposes influence and leverage on others, relies on a ... election/appointment, derives authority from position, and is directly accountable to a constituency of followers.

- **Implied and fragmented leadership** provides a consensual (and often confused) view of direction, operates on an implicit rather than explicit forward plan and puts together packages of resources through joint funding arrangements. Leadership is virtually invisible, and depends on a team of secondees/temporary staff which has delegated and often shifting membership, derives authority from collective sanction, and is less transparently accountable.

- **Emergent and formative leadership** relies on implementation to shape policy, reflects pragmatism in developing future direction, uses adhoc resources to make progress, emphasises learning as the basis for further action, derives authority from getting things done and is accountable for what is done, not what is said.

The conclusion from practice is that designed and focused leadership, a more autonomous approach to leadership can be a strength for partnerships dependent on its style and representational ... concept of formative leadership confirms this view of the fragility of partnership to procure desired ends.

The tasks associated with leadership in partnership change according to the maturity of the relationships. The promotion of partnership working as an idea in order to create a culture in which partnerships are acceptable is a necessary task in facilitative partnerships or where previously partnerships have been rare or non-existent. The establishment of the partnership, by identifying areas of common interest and sounding out prospective participants, carries the culture of partnership to the operational level of collaborative working and to the tasks of co-ordination.

An insight into the issues, challenges and opportunities for leadership in partnerships is provided by the I&DEA capacity framework (2004) which suggests that the leadership element of “Working in partnership” involves building “Positive relationships by making others feel valued, trusted, and by working collaboratively to achieve goals”. An effective leader “maintains calm and focus, recognises when to delegate or provide support and is able to take a long-term view in developing partnerships.”
Given that there appears to be definite, tangible conditions that promote collaborative leadership, it follows that there may also be conditions that hinder it as well. There are myriad of possible impediments to collaborative leadership, however, the research (e.g. Chesterman 2004) identifies two conditions that are most common:

- **Power** – most collaborative movements need to deal with political agendas in one way or another.
- **Differences among stakeholders** – it is important to understand that differences must not only be acknowledged, but also addressed.

**Business Excellence**

Considerable resource has been extended responding to the drive towards excellence and the scope of the review was therefore focused on excellence in the context of the public sector. This section of the report draws on the review of business excellence and continuous improvement literature undertaken by Price Waterhouse Cooper (2000) as part of its evaluation of the Public Sector Excellence Programme.

In terms of the various approaches that they assessed, PWC suggest that the EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management) Model is the only approach originating from the private sector that appears to transfer with ease to the public sector and which incorporates public sector specific criteria. In the private sector, initiatives and programmes promoting excellence have focused on bottom line benefits in economy, efficiency and effectiveness. The challenge for the public sector, since it is not driven by profits and market success, is to use such approaches to promote cost efficiency and effectiveness within its specific public sector environment of regulation and multiple stakeholder needs. The most critical factor for the public sector is the lead set by central government and its modernisation agenda which challenges public sector managers to strive for ever increasing levels of service. The broad scope of the modernisation agenda lends itself to the use of all excellence frameworks and quality initiatives, but it is suggested that the EFQM model is the more appropriate given the government’s insistence on comparing performance against the private sector.

**Theory of Change**

Whilst it is largely impossible to pinpoint the ‘first’ use of the term “Theory of Change”, a hint at its origins can be found in the evaluation community among the work of methodologists, such as Huey Chen, Peter Rossi, Michael Quinn Patton and Carol Weiss. These notable methodologists, along with a host of others, have been thinking about how to apply programme theories to evaluation for at least 20 years. The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change in the USA, has created new ways to evaluate complex community initiatives, with its early work culminating in New Approaches to Evaluating Comprehensive Community Initiatives (1995). It is hypothesised that a key reason complex programmes are so difficult to evaluate is because the assumptions that inspire them are poorly articulated. Research suggests that often stakeholders of complex community initiatives are unclear about how the change process will unfold and therefore place little attention on the early and mid-term changes that need to happen in order for a longer-term goal to be reached.

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Chesterman (2004) suggests that in partnerships, leadership is not “defined by followership but by collective endeavour”. Developing the capacity for local leadership involves establishing the conditions in which “solutions are negotiated, not imposed”. He argues that in partnerships the stress should not be on individual leaders, but on “collective leadership processes”. Leadership in partnerships is, at heart, the process of deliberation, “leadership is enacted through discourse which results in adaptation”. He expresses concern that emphasis on individual leadership competencies draws attention away from developing “the capacity of networked relationships”.

**Collaborative Leadership**

Collaborative Leadership is defined as a process in which people with different views and perspectives come together and discuss issues openly and supportively in an attempt to find ways of helping each other solve a larger problem or achieve broader goals. Research also states that most organisations today are beginning to understand the importance of collaboration (Turning Point 2001). Many are acting on the notion that “having all components share commonality of purpose leads to a productive and positive environment that truly serves the common good” (Linggood et al. 1998). However, what is equally important to the process of collaboration is the leadership necessary to promote and sustain it. Lambert (1998) suggests we change our view of leadership as a noun, to think, instead of leadership as a verb. As such, we would view leadership as an action that includes the processes, activities, and relationships in which organisations and their members engage to undertake the challenge of collaboration.

A consistent theme of collaborative leadership literature is empowerment. The general consensus is that people must be empowered in order to collaborate successfully. Thus the very essence of collaborative leadership is knowing how to empower people and do it in such a way that is fruitful for the people involved. Chesterman also suggested that there are five integral components of empowerment:

- **Assessment** – in order for collaborative leadership to take place, the leaders must be aware of the entire situation in which the collaboration is taking place.
- **Vision** – one cannot collaborate without a vision of the end result.
- **Shared planning** – the step in which the relationship between leaders and stakeholders begins to solidify. Collaborative leaders must acknowledge the expertise of local/stakeholder leadership and allow them to take part in the planning process.
- **Providing resources** – the very nature of empowerment dictates providing the necessary tools to those involved as part of motivating them to engage and fulfill their goals.
- **Trust** – collaborative leadership must trust the members to utilise the resources to the utmost benefit of the collaborative.
Weiss popularised the term "Theory of Change" (TOC) as a way to describe the set of assumptions that explain both the steps that lead to the long-term goal of interest and the connections between programme activities and outcomes that occur at each step of the way. A description of the TOC process is provided below.

**Theory of Change**

The Theory of Change process defines all the building blocks that are required to bring about a given long-term goal. This set of connected building blocks – interchangeably referred to as outcomes, results, accomplishments, or preconditions – is depicted on a map known as a pathway of change, which is a graphical representation of the change process. Built around the pathway of change, a Theory of Change provides a rigorous and disciplined process for defining each outcome in a way that performance indicators can be appropriately allocated to each outcome, as well as highlighting the types of interventions that bring about the outcomes depicted in the pathway of change map. Each outcome in the pathway is tied to an intervention, revealing the often complex web of activity that is required to bring about change.

A Theory of Change would not be complete without an articulation of the assumptions and rationales that stakeholders use to explain the change process represented by the change framework. Assumptions and rationales explain both the connections between early, intermediate and long-term outcomes and the expectations about how and why proposed interventions will bring them about. Often, rationales are supported by research, strengthening the case to be made about the plausibility of the theory and the likelihood that stated goals will be accomplished.

The focus on Theory of Change, both in the USA and UK, has been on its application as a model for evaluation. Little research has been done in terms of its application as a strategic planning tool despite the accepted wisdom of the links between planning and evaluation. The only reference to TOC as a planning tool is in the further work of the Aspen Institute Roundtable and Acknowledge Inc. (Anderson 2004). This research identified a number of points:

- The TOC process is a helpful way to ensure that a group exercises the type of hard thinking that improves the quality of programme planning.
- The quality of the entire TOC hinges on defining the long-term outcome well.
- Focusing on the necessary and sufficient preconditions required to bring about a desired long-term change is more difficult than articulating all of the good ideas a group may have.
- Lack of evidence hampers even the best planners as they attempt to create a high-quality TOC.

**Research Methods**

An Action Research process was undertaken that included the development of a bespoke Partnership Excellence Assessment Tool (PEAT) which was completed by the partners and provided a baseline position in terms of partnership working and business excellence. The Skills for Life Partnership was then taken through a TOC exercise, supported by ongoing reflection sessions, and followed by a series of one-to-one interviews with individual partners. It was felt that this methodology provided an understanding of any movement of the partnership in terms of the initial baseline assessment in addition to the identification of any causal link between this movement and the application of the TOC approach.

The pre-empirical stage of the methodology involved desk research to review the literature in the areas of Leadership, Partnerships, Excellence, and Theory of Change. This process identified the EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management) model and the Nuffield Partnership Assessment Tool as suitable frameworks for application with the Skills for Life Partnership. The EFQM framework and the Nuffield Partnership Assessment Tool were therefore adapted and merged to create a new two part PEAT. Part one, the Partnership Profile, examines the effectiveness of partnership working, and part two, the Excellence Profile, addresses the range of activity of the partnership.

The empirical stage of the research captured and analysed the view of partners through the completion of questionnaires distributed to the 24 partnership members. This was followed by the action element of the research involving the members facilitated through the TOC process. The final element of the empirical research phase involved structured one-to-one interviews with each of the research participants. This enabled an understanding to be gained of whether or not the TOC process had shifted their position in terms of their pursuit of excellence and, if it had, to determine in what way this had been achieved.
Partnership Working - Baseline Assessment

The results suggest a broadly positive view of partnership working, underpinned by a recognition that a partnership working approach is needed, although this has not necessarily resulted in a corresponding level of clarity and realism of purpose, and commitment and ownership. Trust appears to be a positive aspect of the partnership’s work, however the results suggest that there are questions with regard to partnership arrangements and how they monitor, measure and learn. The remainder of the sub-section looks in more detail at the findings for each of the six principles of partnership working.

Principle 1: Recognise and accept the need for partnership working

The TOC process has fundamentally challenged the group’s definition of partnership working. Prior to the research project, the partners consider that they are in danger of not achieving their long-term ambition for Skills for Life in the area.

Principle 2: Develop clarity and realism of purpose

Although the partners felt that they shared a common vision for Skills for Life prior to the TOC process, they reported that it had encouraged them to develop a more succinct vision of what they are collectively trying to achieve in the long-term. Being challenged as a group to set out their vision for the future and agree a long-term goal for the partnership, right at the start of the process, was highlighted as an important element of the methodology. Furthermore, the process challenged the assumption that the vision needs to be realistic. A number of the participants wanted a vision that was realistic and achievable whilst some participants wanted a vision which was ambitious, even to the point of being beyond what might be deemed realistically possible. In broad terms, those who wanted a more realistic long-term goal for the partnership tended to occupy operational positions, whereas the driving force behind a more ambitious long-term goal came from those in more strategic roles. The conclusion to this debate was that the group agreed the more aspirational long-term goal.

Research Findings

The research findings are presented under the relevant principles shown below, firstly in terms of partnership working, and secondly for partnership excellence.

### Partnership Working

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Policy and strategy</th>
<th>People</th>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Processes</th>
<th>Customer results</th>
<th>People results</th>
<th>Key performance indicators</th>
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<td>Ensure commitment and ownership</td>
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<td>Create clear and robust partnership arrangements</td>
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<td>Monitor, measure and learn</td>
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The findings are presented in terms of the baseline position of the partnership prior to the TOC intervention, and a commentary on the research participants views on the impact that Theory of Change has already made, and might additionally do in the future.

### Partnership Working

The following information presents the quantitative data from the baseline assessment provided by PEAT, together with supporting commentary and an analysis of the impact of the TOC approach provided by the data capture methodology. The following diagram presents the findings of the quantitative analysis derived from the completed PEAT questionnaire, for each of the six principles described in greater detail in the following section. A figure above 2.5 reflects a positive view of partnership working for each of the principles. A figure below 2.5 indicates that there are issues to be resolved.
Principle 3: Ensure commitment and ownership

There was recognition from the research participants that the TOC process had a positive impact on their commitment to, and ownership of, the partnership, with participants referring to the process of jointly developing the Pathway of Change as a key factor in achieving this important outcome for the partnership. Having been involved in the development of the Pathway of Change, one of the participants recognised that the emerging change framework was as relevant to his own organisation as it was to the partnership, and that he could see how his organisation contributed to a broader partnership change process. He commented that he now saw the bigger picture and was excited by it, but also recognised how his organisation contributed to achieving specific outcomes in the change framework and ultimately contributed to the achievement of the long-term goal. This identification of the role and responsibility of an individual organisation within the context of wider collaborative working was highlighted as encouraging greater commitment to the partnership.

As an emerging theme from the process, the key question for the research participants was not, if TOC could engender greater commitment from the core partners (although it had), but more about how the organisations on the periphery of the partnership could be engaged in the future use of the methodology so that they may become more integrated within the group.

Principle 4: Develop and maintain trust

The TOC process did not appear to have a measurable impact on the development and maintenance of trust across the partnership within the period of the research project. This is explained in part by a relatively high level of trust in the partnership at the start of the process, although this was tempered by the nature of the funding system which was seen as having a potentially negative impact: a system that encourages a degree of competition working in opposition to a philosophy of partnership working and undermining trust. However, by having a positive impact on the first three partnership principles, TOC was recognised by the participants as providing a transparent and participatory process to encourage trust to offset the competitive nature of the funding system.

Principle 5: Create clear and robust partnership arrangements

As has been illustrated above, TOC has had a positive impact on the definition of organisational roles and responsibilities by providing a methodology that is transparent, participatory and focused on outcomes. The participants commented that having a clearer understanding of what needs to be achieved, and having an understanding of partner roles and responsibilities, provided them with a template to ensure that partnership arrangements are not developed in a way that hinders the achievement of defined outcomes.

Principle 6: Monitor, measure and learn

The research participants recognised that the process of identifying performance indicators for each of the outcomes in the Pathway of Change provided a structure and focus for future collective evaluation activity and that this should in turn lead to a deeper understanding of change processes. It also highlighted that there are different ways to think about the impact of their work and whether it is making a difference.

A critical element in developing a TOC is the process of backwards mapping—determining the detailed steps which need to be taken to achieve the desired goal. However, the process of forward mapping—looking forward from the long-term goal to thinking about what the wider outcomes from achieving this goal provide the participants with a greater insight into the ultimate driving force behind what they do. For example, having highlighted the long-term goal as “wiping out poor adult literacy and numeracy”, the partners were asked to think about what the outcome from this would be. They highlighted that achieving this outcome would lead to “People functioning in society” and “People being prepared for employment” and hence, the ultimate measure of success related to the difference they had made to people’s lives rather than the quantitative figures focused on learner achievement.

Having to articulate fully the definitions of outcomes and identify all the assumptions that underpinned the Pathway of Change, allowed partners to bring a number of points of view to the surface, not all of which had previously been identified, and to then provide a basis for discussion. This process allowed the partners to gain a deeper understanding of each other’s perspectives, engendering a higher level of trust across the group. The process of identifying rationales— the connections between early, intermediate and long-term outcomes and the expectations about how and why proposed interventions will bring them about—highlighted that there was experience and knowledge embedded randomly across the partnership that, if brought together and shared, would enhance the collective understanding of what the partnership is trying to achieve and how they can do it more efficiently and effectively. Furthermore, it highlighted that there were gaps in their reasoning and evidence relating to the achievement of certain outcomes and that, without addressing these gaps, they could not be confident that they would ultimately achieve their long-term goal.

Pursuing Excellence

This section of the report focuses on the research findings relating to the partnership’s Pursuit of Excellence and initially presents the quantitative data resulting from the baseline assessment provided by PEAT, as well as the supplementary commentary provided by the qualitative interview process. The qualitative data from the one-to-one interview process additionally supports an analysis of the impact of a TOC methodology, the findings of which are also presented in this section.
The diagram below presents the findings of the quantitative analysis of the completed PEAT questionnaire. A figure above 2.5 indicates that the respondents feel that the partnership is achieving excellence in the specific principles, and a figure below 2.5 suggests that they are not.

**Partnership Excellence - Baseline Assessment**

The results suggest that the partnership is not currently achieving excellence in any of the principles assessed. However, the qualitative data present a slightly different picture. The partners recognised the importance of all the principles in terms of their own organisations and that they are achieving a significantly higher level of excellence than the findings suggest. Their view of partnership working, prior to undertaking the TOC approach, meant that they felt challenged by scorers the partnership against these principles and the results reflected this. The respondents did however highlight that conducting a TOC process had challenged their perception of partnership working and could now see that the principles should be considered within a partnership context as well as within an individual organisational context.

The remainder of this section looks in more detail at the research findings under three headings informed by the EFQM process; leadership, excellence enablers, and excellence results.

**Leadership**

Earlier sections of the report identified that a TOC approach has had a positive impact in terms of the partners recognising the need for partnership working, as well as providing a robust change framework that includes a shared vision of what the partnership is trying to achieve and how they will achieve it. By instigating a TOC approach, the college and local authority have enabled other partners to see the transformational nature of their work – they are about making a difference – and to see their role and responsibility in terms of leadership of the group. The TOC approach has therefore encouraged a movement away from a centralist, directive leadership approach, to one that recognises individual areas of expertise and a dispersal of the leadership function across the group. This has been achieved because the methodology challenges the partners to be robust in their thinking, which results in a deeper and collective understanding of what they are about. This concept of leadership resonates with Chesterman’s view which suggests that leadership in partnerships is not “defined by followership but by collective endeavour”.

**Excellence Enablers**

The most significant impact that TOC has had in this context is to challenge the suggestion that partnership excellence is an aggregation of the individual excellence approaches and that no added value comes from dealing with excellence at a partnership level. Although the research participants did not fully buy-in to a partnership approach to excellence at the start of the process, a number of them changed their position during the research programme.

As part of the development of the Pathway of Change, the participants highlighted that a quality learning experience was a pre-condition to an individual learner achieving the appropriate level of literacy and numeracy. In defining what quality meant, the partners realised that they had differing views on what constituted a quality learning experience. In turn, the research participants identified the benefit of working together to achieve a common understanding of what excellence means, leading to an enhanced learner experience and a consistency from one partner to another.

**Excellence Results**

The impact here suggested to partners that there is added value in considering these at the partnership level in order that strategy development is informed by facts rather than perceptions. One research participant, who has a background in quality and continuous improvement, was very clear that understanding the results of partnership activity collectively has to be a key feature of what the partnership does when it comes together. She also commented that TOC, as a structured and robust strategic planning and evaluation methodology, provides the change framework that allows the partnership to become strategic and to consider excellence as a partnership issue.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

This case study of a Skills for Life Partnership sought to assess whether a TOC approach to strategic planning would support the Skills for Life Partnership’s pursuit of excellence. The conclusions from the research are presented in this section of the report under the headings: Partnership Working, Leadership, and Excellence.

**Partnership Working**

TOC has had a positive impact on five of the six principles that research has shown as defining effective partnership working, specifically: recognising and accepting the need for partnership; developing clarity and realism of purpose; ensuring commitment and ownership; developing and maintaining trust, monitoring, measuring and learning. The TOC process has fundamentally challenged the group’s definition of partnership working. Without a more collective, strategic approach to partnership working, the partners now realise that they are in danger of not achieving their long-term ambition for Skills for Life in the area.

Although the partners felt that they shared a common vision for Skills for Life prior to the TOC process, they reported that the TOC approach had encouraged them to develop a clearer and more succinct vision of what they are collectively trying to achieve in the long-term. Furthermore, the process challenged the assumption from
Pursuing Excellence

The most significant impact that TOC has had in this context is to challenge the suggestion that partnership excellence is an aggregation of the individual excellence approaches and that no added value comes from dealing with excellence at a partnership level. This research process concludes that TOC was a structured and robust planning methodology supporting the partnership in becoming more strategic and highlighting the pursuit of excellence as a partnership issue.

Acknowledgments

The Research Team would like to thank Dr Heléne Clarke and Chris Barber from ActKnowledge Inc for their advice and guidance in applying the Theory of Change methodology and to Tony Settle and Richard Graham for their support in editing the document. We would also like to acknowledge the contribution of Gateshead Skills for Life Partnership for taking part in the research exercise.

the literature that the vision needs to be realistic, with this partnership agreeing that they would commit to a more ambitious long-term goal. Having identified and agreed a long-term goal for the partnership, the process then challenged the participants to map backwards all the things that need to be put in place to achieve their long-term ambition. The partners recognised that the Pathway of Change process provided them with a mechanism to identify shared aims and objectives as well as helping them to define service outcomes, in a way that was structured, rigorous and robust.

There was a recognition from the research participants that the TOC process had made a positive impact on their commitment to, and ownership of, the partnership with participants referring to the process of jointly developing the Pathway of Change as a key factor in achieving this important outcome for the partnership. Furthermore, the identification of the roles and responsibilities of an individual organisation within the context of wider collaborative working was highlighted as encouraging greater commitment to the partnership. TOC was recognised as providing a transparent and participatory process to encourage trust and work to oppose the competitive nature of the funding system. Having to articulate fully the definitions of outcomes and identify all the assumptions that underpinned the pathway of change allowed partners to bring a number of points of view to the surface, not all of which had previously been identified.

The research participants recognised that the process of identifying performance indicators for each of the outcomes in the pathway of change provided them with a structure and focus for future collective evaluation activity and that this would in turn lead to a deeper understanding about their change process. The process of identifying rationales highlighted that there was experience and knowledge embedded across the partnership which, if brought together and shared, would enhance the collective understanding of what the partnership is trying to achieve and how they can do it more efficiently and effectively. Furthermore, it highlighted that there were gaps in reasoning and evidence relating to the achievement of certain outcomes and that, without addressing these gaps, the partnership could not be confident it would ultimately achieve its long-term goal.

Leadership

This research indicates that more effective collaborative leadership results from undertaking a TOC approach to strategic planning as it empowers partner representatives to commit resources to the achievement of a shared long-term goal. It achieves this through a transparent and participatory planning process that is structured, robust and rigorous. By instigating a TOC approach, the college and local authority enabled other partners to see the transformational nature of their work and to see their roles and responsibilities in terms of group leadership. The TOC approach has therefore encouraged a movement away from a centralist, directive leadership approach, to one that recognises individual areas of expertise and a dispersal of the leadership function across the group. In this sense the impact of TOC resonates with Chesterman’s view of leadership in partnerships being defined by “collective endeavour”.
References


Further information and Contact Details

Research and development are central to CEL's organisational mission and we seek to encourage mutually beneficial interrelations between theory, development, policy and practice. 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. A particularly distinctive feature of the CEL practitioner programme is that it enables staff working in the sector to participate in the setting of the research agendas, to define highly relevant issues for leadership and to investigate and research these key themes.

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