“From a distributed perspective, leadership involves mortals as well as heroes. It involves the many and not just the few. It is about leadership practice, not simply roles and positions. And leadership practice is about interactions, not just the actions of heroes.” (Spillane 2006)
Research Publication Notices

Research Reports
Many of the documents in this series are prepublication/preprint articles, which may subsequently appear (part or whole) in peer reviewed journals and books. In most cases they are draft documents, the purpose of which is to foster discussion and debate, prior to publication elsewhere, whilst ideas are still fresh. Further information about the research programme and other papers in this series can also be found at the following websites:
http://www.centreforexcellence.org.uk or
http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/leadership/cel/

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Editorial Introduction, Professor David Collinson

Introduction

This is the eighth edited collection in the series of CEL volumes designed to showcase research produced by “practitioners” in the Learning and Skills Sector (LSS) on important leadership-related themes. Policy makers, practitioners and theorists increasingly identify “distributed”, “shared” and “collaborative” leadership as important means for enhancing quality and ensuring continuous improvement in UK education. This volume presents four research reports that raise significant, but under-researched questions about the conditions, processes and consequences of these relatively new “post-heroic” ideas about leadership as they are enacted within the LSS.

The traditional view of leadership tends to assume a tough, charismatic and “heroic” leader, who utilises a dictatorial approach and operates within a single organization. Recently, new ‘post-heroic’ ideas have emphasised the value of more collaborative and less hierarchical practices, enacted through fluid, multi-directional interactions, networks and partnerships. While these ideas about “shared”, “distributed”, “collaborative” and “networked” leadership are not necessarily interchangeable, they all imply a more collaborative and shared notion of power and authority.

The four practitioner reports that comprise this volume build on earlier CEL research publications from both the HE (Jameson 2007, Briggs et al 2007) and practitioner programmes (Collinson 2007e) that address these themes. Informed also by recent conceptual wok in this area (e.g. Spillane 2006, Pearce and Conger), they highlight a number of key messages for distributed and shared leadership in the LSS. Whilst the first report explores distributed leadership primarily in FE, the following three consider shared, distributed and collaborative leadership in the areas of local authorities and adult and community learning. These researchers tend to view distributed leadership as the vertical dispersal of authority and responsibility and to see shared leadership in terms of the horizontal dimensions of these processes.

John Evans (City College Brighton and Hove) argues that the literature on distributed leadership typically assumes that leadership is enacted in the same way, whatever the level of participant. His research challenges this view, suggesting that particular leadership behaviours are more relevant to middle managers than they are to senior managers or principals. Evans highlights the need for a fundamental re-assessment of training and development programmes and of the meaning of “leadership”, particularly as it is applied to different levels of staff in an organisation.
Sarah Watson (Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council) describes how shared leadership is developed within a small middle management team in a local authority adult learning provider. Watson identifies how shared leadership can develop between team managers who have relatively distinct, independent teams and priorities. Her study reveals the importance of relationship development in building a leadership team and concludes that shared leadership can impact positively on the individual skills and confidence of managers.

The report by Iram Naz (Workers Education Authority, West Midlands region) explores how distributed leadership could help to involve part-time and geographically dispersed tutors within curriculum development activities. Naz highlights the importance of empowering tutors to take charge of the task and ownership of the curriculum development activity. This enabled tutors to use their expertise and experiences as they perceived necessary, which, in turn, enhanced tutors’ confidence to be leaders.

Finally, Ian Yarroll (Telford and Wrekin Council) explores local authorities’ experience of delivering first steps learning. This project found that local authorities adopted collaborative approaches to leadership working with other FE sector providers and through a wide range of partnerships. Yarroll recommends that, in order to deliver a multi agency and coherent approach to adult learning, there needs to be a recognition of the importance of collaborative leadership.

In editing this 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.

**The CEL Practitioner Research Programme**

These four CEL reports are drawn from the 2007-08 round of research commissioning. In the summer of 2007, the Lancaster research team launched Phase Four of the CEL practitioner research programme with a nation-wide tender process. As in previous years, this tender attracted an enormous response, providing further evidence of the very strong appetite that exists across the LSS to conduct research on the sector, by the sector and for the sector. For the period October 2007 to March 2008, the evaluation panel agreed to fund 35 practitioner research projects, based on the following research themes: Distributed Leadership, Employer Engagement, Equality and Diversity, Leadership Excellence, Leading Quality Improvement, Learner Voice, and Talent Management and Leadership Development.
The CEL practitioner research programme enables practising leaders and managers in the sector to undertake research on highly relevant and topical 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 engage with research. The main aims of the programme are to:

- support research that critically investigates leadership issues in the LSS,
- provide the sector and stakeholders with evidence-based and theoretically-informed research findings by addressing current issues,
- strengthen networks linking practice, research and policy to build awareness of the importance of practitioners engaging with the research process,
- disseminate research findings as widely as possible and communicate these in ways that are useful to recipients,
- encourage networking between researchers to build a sustainable research community within the LSS.

Since its inception, we have steadily increased year on year the amount of funding allocated to the Practitioner Project Scheme to cope with the large number of applications received through the annual tendering system.

The programme provides individual practitioner-researchers with the opportunity to develop their own original research question, reflect on current practice, and produce research findings that can both shape organisational change and improve future policy and practice. Each project begins with a clear plan to examine a particular research question informed by specific assumptions, methodologies and objectives. Practitioner researchers attend two workshops which provide support and guidance in undertaking the research, analysing the data, and writing-up final reports. The design of each workshop is a mixture of information-giving and network opportunities with space for dialogue and discussion. There is also an opportunity at each event to deal with any dilemmas or issues that may have emerged during the project.

Research is central to CEL’s 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.
There are many leadership issues in FE, and in the LSS more broadly, that warrant investigation and analysis. Yet, research in this sector is still very much in its infancy (Hillier and Jameson 2003). 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. This strengthening of a research community in the LSS constitutes an 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 researchers’ own understandings and practices. The programme is therefore designed to foster the research-based skills and expertise of staff in the sector. 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.

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 empirical research (Fox, Martin and Green 2007). Suffice it to say here, that theory and practice are best viewed as inter-related and the CEL research programme seeks to encourage mutually-reinforcing relationships between theory, development, policy and practice.

Since the practitioner scheme began in October 2004, over 100 projects have been funded. In 2007, CEL published five edited volumes of evidence-based practitioner research, as follows:

- Volume 1 - Researching Leadership in the Learning and Skills Sector: By the Sector, On the Sector, For the Sector
- Volume 2 - Developing Middle Leaders
- Volume 3 - Leading Quality Improvement
- Volume 4 - Leadership and the Learner Voice
- Volume 5 - Collaborative Leadership.

To date, over 7,000 copies have been distributed across the sector with Volumes 1 & 4 already having to go to reprint. From the current phase (2007-08), we are now publishing another series of CEL practitioner research volumes.
Feedback received so far from the sector indicates that the CEL Practitioner Research Programme is beginning to have a significant impact, informing practice, influencing leadership development, helping to engage those working in the sector with research and building a sustainable research community. A key aim of the programme has been to disseminate the research findings as widely as possible and to communicate these in ways useful to recipients. Practitioners, stakeholders and policy makers are much more likely to engage with the research if it is relatively easy to digest, useful and practical. Therefore the research is disseminated in comparatively small, readable reports that are designed to facilitate the implementation of evidence based research into practice.

The CEL programme provides practitioner researchers with space to reflect on current practice, to explore how other organisations work and how they could improve their performance as individuals, teams and in organisations. It can also facilitate staff development in the LSS. For example, CEL research publications are being used on leadership and management programmes and as professional development for staff, with some colleges giving accreditation for participation in a research project as part of their CPD.

For organisations, the research has encouraged new collaborative partnerships and the sharing of good practice. CEL has found that engaging practitioners with the research process has given the sector a sense of ownership, as well as increasing awareness of the importance of research and how it can influence and improve policy and practice. In these ways, the CEL practitioner research programme is helping to facilitate more reflexive, critical and reflective learning cultures within the LSS.
References

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Distributed Leadership: Investigating the distinction between the rhetoric of leadership and the behaviour required to be a successful “middle manager” in Further Education

John Evans, City College Brighton and Hove

Executive Summary

Since the mid–1990s, the term “distributed leadership” has become increasingly influential. The current literature on distributed leadership tends to assume that “leadership” is displayed and demonstrated in the same way, whatever the level of participant. This project challenges this view by arguing that there are particular “leadership” behaviours that are more relevant to middle managers than they are to senior managers/directors or principals at the head of an organisation. The project shows that the concerns and expectations, as expressed by three cohorts of middle managers in Post 16 education and a fourth group from the private sector, are quite different to those that might be expected of a “leader” at the head of a school or a college. The results highlight the need for a fundamental re-assessment of the meaning of leadership, particularly when it is applied to different levels of staff in an organisation. They also suggest that training and development programmes for staff need to be reviewed to give greater attention to the attributes identified by this project, namely team building, time prioritisation, engaging with the needs of their team members and acting with fairness and consistency at all times.

Introduction

In the “Handbook for Inspecting Colleges” Ofsted specifically makes reference to the view that “leadership” occurs at all levels of a college, and resides in more places than merely the principal’s office (1). Ofsted may judge how effective the principal is in ensuring that “the leaders” of the organisation are effective at motivating, influencing and producing an environment where the achievement of the learners is paramount. The “leaders” are deemed to be those at all points in the organisation who have a responsibility for organising the operational achievement of those goals. The need, therefore, to distinguish between the concept of “leadership” at the top of an organisation, and the kind of leadership that is closer and invisibly intertwined with the daily operational pressures of student and staff supervision is becoming more and more important. This will ensure that colleges are able to recruit, direct and train such middle managers for the most appropriate tasks relevant to their level in the College.
This project explores the distinction between the behaviours and actions that broadly characterise the “leadership” of a single person, and the “distributed leadership” behaviours which are necessary for effective operational leadership and management in the “middle” of a college. It addresses the challenge that “middle level leadership” offers as staff in this position seek to combine the tension of working towards the vision expressed by the college at a strategic level, and leading operational teams whose focus is inevitably narrowed down to individuals’ performance and the everyday needs of operating efficiency in the face of often significant resource constraints.

Debates on leadership stretch back more than 50 years, and cover a well-trodden spectrum embracing “The Great Man Theory” at one end and travelling through Behavioural, Participative, Situational and Contingency theories into the Transactional and Transformational landscape where most can be found today, and from where the current development of “distributed leadership” stems. There are a number of examples to illustrate how the debate has shifted in the past five years, not least with the emergence of Ofsted’s own inquiry into the effectiveness of leadership at multiple organisational levels. The most important of these was probably Collins’ (2001) notion of “the triumph of humility and fierce resolve”, embodied in a concept called “Level 5 Leadership” (2).

This combines an absolute requirement for humility at the top and an absence of hubris with fierce professional will to secure objectives; Level 5 leadership thus goes beyond “great people” and back around the circle of participative, democratic and other styles to combine a particular personal style of behaviour with that of strategic determination. Level 5 leadership does not deny the importance of four levels below it, but these are building blocks in other parts of the organisation. Thus, it provides a sound description of the desired level at which, it is hoped, our middle managers operate: level 3 is about “competent managers who are able to organise people and resources towards the effective and efficient pursuit of predetermined objectives”. This project examines what happens when distributed leadership is both required and demonstrated by those in the middle of an organisation, namely those in the English FE system.

**Research Framework**

A previous CEL report (Evans 2007) (4) identified weaknesses in the training and development programmes for middle managers. A survey of more than 40 colleges indicated that the focus of training for middle managers centred on “technical management skills” connected with the operational needs of the role (i.e. funding, efficient deployment of staff, financial control and management and coordination of students). A minority of training programmes devoted, at most, approximately 15% of time allocated to the development of “soft” skills such as influencing, motivating and supporting staff in complex operational situations, and rarely invoked the use of the word “leadership” in the theoretical underpinning applied to such programmes.
The emergence of the idea that there are other layers to “leadership” and places where it can happen has been focussed in the public sector on both sides of the Atlantic, as the complexities and challenges of recruiting to senior positions have developed in the past ten years. There has been an inverse and counter intuitive relationship between the coming of age of “participative” and “facilitative” management theories, a growing sense of the need to engage more (and more at all levels in organisations) with the vision and objectives, yet a continued reluctance to break away from the traditional view that “a super head” can change institutional performance in a very short time.

Ideas about distributed or dispersed leadership challenge traditional approaches by raising questions about the relationship between leaders and followers. The growing interest in “distributed leadership” represents an interest in the decentralisation of leadership skills, but they also require a re-examination of the “knowledge – power” relationship and thus undermine the position of actual leaders (Ray, Clegg & Stewart, in Storey 2005). In Ray et al’s view, “people who hold positions of dominance, by virtue of the acceptance by others of their superiority, become legitimate ‘carriers of meaning’ and ‘producers of truth’.…..thus the traditional role of traditional leaders has been about controlling agendas and ‘creating new truths’.” The current debate about distributed leadership continues to focus on the notion of “leadership” as providing the context for “sense making”, for providing vision and motivation to change and develop. However, there has been little attention given to whether the very definition of “leadership” and leadership skills should be reviewed and re-assessed when it is applied to those in the middle of organisations. The purpose of this report is to ask practitioners about the kinds of behaviour which best exemplify their roles, and the expectations of their teams; this will then, potentially, give us a firmer view of the kind of training and development which is required.

In the ebb and flow of management and leadership theory, the flow at the moment, especially in its espousal by regulatory bodies concerned with education, is in favour of “distributed and dispersed” patterns, “in line with the preferred cultures and structures of organisations, leaning towards empowered teams, distributed responsibility, network forms, and knowledge workers….made up of player/managers, professional service firms and knowledge workers” (Storey, 2005). This allows the concept to be developed, and for its attributes to be dissected, but it does little to resolve the inherent tension implicit in the question: Who sets the agendas in the organisation?

Recent educational literature has tended to focus on the tensions, rather than the attributes and behaviours that are required to either overcome or work within this tension. Authors such as Shain and Gleeson (1997) claim that core staff in the middle of colleges are strategically accepting the new regime of managerial needs while operating within their own framework of academic values and standards. Shain and Gleeson see this as a major new notion of “re-professionalisation” of teachers, and especially middle managers, where this “filtering” process will be most dynamic and sensitive in terms of the results which it produces. This in turn, however, only heightens the importance of the question: Who sets the agenda and controls the
“truth”? Briggs (2004) indicates that out of this a number of “roles” for the new professional middle manager are emerging among which the most sensitive might be that of the middle manager as “leader”. Briggs highlights a dual manifestation of “a concern for supporting people and achieving results” and “a concern for shaping and sharing the vision”.

An NCSL paper (Bennett et al 2003) suggests three distinct qualities of DL:

- a group of individuals, emergent concerted action,
- the openness of the boundaries, which brings people into the circle from wide arenas,
- the power of a concertive dynamic which brings together a group of “experts” to create leadership capacity, where the sum is greater than the individual parts.

The first of these is seen as paramount to the process but also that they do not necessarily see a contradiction between the existence or activity of strong single/senior leadership, more that concerted action through relationships allows for strong partners in relationships which at the same time entail power disparities between them.

The NCSL paper cites Harris and Chapman (2002) who identify five strategies needed for school success. In doing this, however, they also introduce a further co-terminus definition of DL with that of “democratic leadership”, which expresses the importance of values and equity in the process, but does not throw light on the nature of the behaviour that should be demonstrated. Harris and Chapman suggest that distributed leadership is part of a wider model of leadership that still stems from the tone, values and behaviour of the person at the top, and make a connection between the school context and the adoption of an additional notion of “democratic leadership”. They indicate that school leaders can adopt a form of leadership that allows collaboration and democratic activity to take place, which involves “distributive leadership” to take place throughout the organisation. They base their discussion in traditional forms of leadership, where the agenda is set at the top and the values and ethics driving the organisations are exemplified by the person in charge and the rest of the organisation is expected to follow.

Spillane (2006) sees much more importance lying in the notions of “distributed cognitive and activity theory” around the central importance of sense making of the environment. Thus “the people, the history, the events, and the physical setting are all part of the situation wherein leadership is exercised, …..and that leadership can be co-enacted across a range of situations, involving both formal and informal organisational arrangements. Spillane argues that leadership responsibilities can be exercised in a wide range of positional and informal contexts, and the relationship between the micro and macro processes involved are key to their success.
The NCSL paper also considers the view of Ket de Vries, based on a non-Western community, where distributed leadership is clearly deployed through effective team working, informal authority, egalitarian, trust, moral values, and all members of a group are empowered to make decisions. Respect is based not on age, gender, wealth or status, but on experience and knowledge.

The value of the NCSL paper lies in its broad sweep of research rather than its conclusions, but it does indicate the direction that must be followed if a working definition of distributed leadership can be produced, “demonstrable behaviour” identified, and appropriate training and development put in place. Wilkinson (2007) argues that distributed leadership is different from traditional or typical forms of leadership, requiring organisations to think, act and behave in different ways. If Wilkinson is correct, then it will also be necessary to find out and identify what those behaviours are, so that middle managers may be developed who are comfortable in their roles, and not merely trying to emulate a quite different type of leadership, from the head of the organisation. This literature review reveals some degree of consensus about how the concept might be defined in terms of overall outcomes, but there is little research that suggests what the demonstrable behaviours are of people in the middle of organisations.
Research Methods

The project objective was to identify real behaviours that middle managers should exhibit in order to comfortably and effectively fulfil their roles, and to distil this within the concept of “distributed leadership”. The literature on “leadership” appears to assume that the qualities to be demonstrated are the same at both senior and middle levels. This project sets out to show that there are some leadership qualities that are either difficult to demonstrate or inappropriate at middle levels, and this can confuse and distort training and development needs. The project carried out the following stages:

(i) A group of middle managers were asked to identify what they thought “leaders” (i.e. above them in their organisations) should do, behave like and demonstrate in their relationships with staff and teams.

(ii) Four groups of middle managers were asked to complete an open and public questionnaire, developed by the then Department of Trade and Industry (2004/5) (4) which assessed current leadership style preferences. Three groups were from the public FE sector, and a fourth was drawn from middle managers on a high ranking MBA programme, in both public and private sectors. A fifth group was sought, but has been unable to contribute in time, from the UK Armed Forces, of recently promoted junior officers.

(iii) One group of staff from the FE sector was asked: “What kind of behaviours do you believe your staff expect of you in your role as a middle manager and team leader?”. This produced two lists of 20 point statements, which participants from all three FE organisations were asked to score for importance. These scores are then compared and contrasted with the “leadership” criteria and scores in (ii).

(iv) Finally, participants from all three FE organisations were asked for no more than 50 words that describe what they perceive as the most important “leadership” characteristic which they have to try and display and demonstrate in their current role.

Research Findings

The following are the desired “leadership behaviours” produced by a workshop seminar drawing on colleagues from GFE’s/6th form colleges, at levels from programme leader up to assistant principal. The behaviours were identified using a process of sifting and sorting ideas through “random idea generation” and scoring of consensus agreement. These statements were elicited through questions centred on “leaders” in general, rather than in the middle of organisations, and were produced to try and highlight the difference between the general and the particular, with reference to the two control groups identified later on, from the host college and the external to FE group.
Effective Leaders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DO</th>
<th>DO NOT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encourage</td>
<td>Inappropriate behaviour, e.g. dealing with staff issues in the corridor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspire</td>
<td>Interfere with managers’ roles/conflict with management’s decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be passionate</td>
<td>Shy away from difficult situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prioritise</td>
<td>Lose touch with reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe</td>
<td>Remember what it was like to be a junior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Operate a blame culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivate</td>
<td>Lead by knee-jerk reactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be example/role model</td>
<td>Lead in the wrong direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visionary/exciting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal risk takers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognise and create opportunities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make changes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take organisation on a journey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy/big picture/long term</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SHOULD</th>
<th>SHOULD NOT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrate vision</td>
<td>Risk take with college finance etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrate success</td>
<td>Make assumptions about skill level of staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledge impact of decisions</td>
<td>Adapt college policies incorrectly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change and adapt</td>
<td>Boast about their: posts, possessions and importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manage communication</td>
<td>Be bogged down in here and now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be people-oriented</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manage risk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be good communicators</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible/adaptable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopt a coaching role</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be humble</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be effective/empathic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make a difference</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have integrity and moral position</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embrace diversity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The clear message from this exercise was that “leaders” are expected to behave in certain ways, regardless of the context or level in an organisation at which they operate. There are universal themes in these statements, especially in “Do not” and “Should not” sections, which one might find in all the literature about leadership. The objective was to seek out statements that were universal, and not necessarily tied to any one level. This suggests a significant difference to when “leadership” behaviour or criteria are applied and interpreted specifically by staff at a particular level in the organisation.

The first group of middle managers in a GFE were asked to address themselves and participate in a public questionnaire, available to all on the internet. This questionnaire was created by the DTI to underpin and develop ideas as to how behaviours might be developed and adapted as part of a national initiative to raise the profile and use of Management Charter concepts and ideas in business organisations. At the time of writing, a considerable data base of results has been built up. This questionnaire is constructed on a similar basis to the standard Myers Briggs 16 Dimension Assessment tool. The questions require the selection and scoring of two alternatives. They were deliberately set, in some cases, to make the choice difficult and thus extenuate the impact of the scoring. The questions produced scored results across 18 dimensions of behaviour that are considered key “leadership” behaviours as a result of setting up the questionnaire. In the same way as the standard MBTI questionnaire, the results are not seeking to identify strengths or weaknesses, but rather preferences for behaving in a certain way or style. The importance of the scores is their indication of one’s strength of preference for that particular style or behaviour; the assessment report provided indicates how the criteria with lower scores are not indicating “strength or weakness” but are suggesting that there may be situations and circumstances where the development of skills or behaviour in this or that area may be beneficial, but as a combination of the whole, do not indicate “weakness”. It is thus a “self-coaching” tool, not a test.

All the participants across all four groups (nearly 40 in total) completed their questionnaires independently and in widely differing personal and work situations. Some of the fourth group are middle managers in continental European businesses, providing some cross-cultural confirmation of the findings. The 18 criteria are listed below:

- Team Builder
- Self Belief
- Social Adaptability
- Visionary
- Enabler
- People Champion
These criteria are then scored on a scale from 0 – 100; the scores against each criterion are the sum total of the preference scores against a question of the forced choice pair, on a scale of 0 – 5; thus the "stronger" the score in each case, the more times a participant has scored that attribute with a "5" rather than a "0".

The criteria were judged by the initial group to be symmetric and synergistic with what they would expect to be "leadership behaviours" exhibited by their superiors. The first group were then asked to undertake the questionnaire and complete the answers from a firm position based on their own role, in work, at this particular point in time. Thus we are assessing the degree of congruence they feel in their own behaviour with that of the 18 criteria. The results of the first group are shown below, from a group of 15 middle managers, spanning both curriculum and support functions in a middle sized GFE:
### Table 1:

#### Group 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team Builder</td>
<td>1159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enabler</td>
<td>958</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Adaptability</td>
<td>946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Belief</td>
<td>934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visionary</td>
<td>933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective</td>
<td>883</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People Champion</td>
<td>870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic Learner</td>
<td>861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity Aware</td>
<td>842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Minded</td>
<td>826</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusi</td>
<td>810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent</td>
<td>789</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values Champion</td>
<td>731</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Champion</td>
<td>713</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactive</td>
<td>707</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing What Works</td>
<td>693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Reliance</td>
<td>667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legacy Builder</td>
<td>633</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2:
The results for the following three groups are shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TOTAL 2 (7)</th>
<th>TOTAL 3 (6)</th>
<th>TOTAL 4 (9)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team Builder</td>
<td>596</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>688</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Reliance</td>
<td>498</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values Champion</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>614</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People Champion</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>491</td>
<td>651</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Adaptability</td>
<td>557</td>
<td>486</td>
<td>646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Champion</td>
<td>469</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic Learner</td>
<td>643</td>
<td>486</td>
<td>706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Belief</td>
<td>628</td>
<td>471</td>
<td>660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enabler</td>
<td>591</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>672</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusuer</td>
<td>559</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>554</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective</td>
<td>529</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>689</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactive</td>
<td>497</td>
<td>449</td>
<td>549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing What Works</td>
<td>467</td>
<td>454</td>
<td>516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity Awareness</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visionary</td>
<td>514</td>
<td>413</td>
<td>704</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Mindedness</td>
<td>533</td>
<td>417</td>
<td>541</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent</td>
<td>412</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>546</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legacy Builder</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>418</td>
<td>484</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is important to note the following characteristics of the four groups:

- They are all middle managers, dealing with teams and projects and are less likely to be involved in “strategy making”.
- Groups 1, 2 and 3 are all employed in the UK public sector Post 16 education and training sector.
- Group 4 are volunteers from within a MBA student group in the middle of their distance learning programme.
- All completed the questionnaires independently, and prior to any further consideration of the project brief or objectives and thus did not come to the questions with any but general views as to key behaviours.

The third element of the research explored middle managers’ views of staff’s expectations of them. The following tables outline their responses based on the two lists of 20 point statements, against which participants from all 3 FE organisations were asked to score for importance.

### Table 3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mid Mgt Desired Behaviours (1)</th>
<th>Score Coll 1 (120)</th>
<th>Score Coll 2 (70)</th>
<th>Score Coll 3 (60)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taking responsibility for our team’s work</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instigating and managing change</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collecting Information and data</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding how success is monitored, measured and communicated</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing information with those above and below</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being an effective role model</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining an open and professional dialogue</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectively praising success</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing individual strengths and supporting them</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being seen to effectively challenge poor performance</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsive to others needs</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A voice speaking up for all in the team</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrating effective trust and respect</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrating a consistent and fair approach</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making time for people</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showing interest in all aspects of team’s work</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undertaking, shaping and communicating future Planning</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting and developing others</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showing a public positive “can do” approach</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating a global vision</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mid Mgt Desired Behaviour (2)</th>
<th>Score Coll 1</th>
<th>Score Coll 2</th>
<th>Score Coll 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inspiring others through word, vision and example</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrating well organised work patterns</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicating personal commitment to the workplace objective</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping communication Channels open – with a flow of info/data in and out of the team</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being proactive in maintaining order and sense</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showing a clear “can do” mentality</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining an optimistic outlook and demeanour</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognising one’s role as accountable</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrating and maintaining compliance</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A gap of about ten weeks was allowed between the creation of the behaviour lists in Table 3 and their re-distribution to the original group and to the groups in the two partner colleges. The respondents were asked to score these attributes on a range of difficulty between 0 - 10; 10 indicated an attribute that was readily demonstrated on a regular basis, with a decreasing score indicating the degree of difficulty that respondents felt able to demonstrate a particular attribute. In the above table, the distance numerically from the potential total score for each one by each group indicates a perception that the attribute may be desirable, but is more and more difficult to demonstrate as the score decreases down to 5 or less.

At the end of this process, respondents were asked to describe their roles in a short text statement, which illustrated the challenges and difficulties facing middle managers in FE. This was considered important as a final “evidence checker” that the participants were expressing themselves with some consistency in both questionnaires and in their real perceptions. The following are their core contributions.
All the following statements may be preceded by the words “I believe the most important leadership characteristic to be:

- recognising the pace of change and implementation and adapting plans in response to the needs of one’s team, while staying close to the vision.

- that a leader does not build a team for selfish reasons. A true team works for shared, positive, evolving values.

- that effective leadership comes by understanding your team and creating ideas and enthusiasm through the successful people and interpersonal skills of the (team) leader.

- (coping with the difficulty) of not being able to plan ahead due to short term budgetary forecasting, and the ingrained issues about resisting change.

- to demonstrate in my current role good communication, enabling and encouraging members of the team and adaptability/flexibility to deal with the numerous different situations that crop up.

- being an enabler of the team, to move the team along, along with a level of trust and autonomy.

- integrity in dealing with other staff, including people you are managing etc., working honestly in terms of aims of the organisation in favour of the students.

- to inspire, motivate, and set an example to all my staff, to offer support and training and, to be continually consistent.

- inspirational to help a team remain or become positive, to deal with change, and encourage creative problem solving... to be a great motivator to stimulate ideas and insight from a team.

- an effective role model and to be aspirational and forward looking, being people focussed and enabling others to develop and progress their own practice.

- a combination of interpersonal skills, personal capability, leading and managing change, to provide a sense of direction, purpose and insight, where a good leader will develop and build on team strengths.

- to display integrity, to be fair and consistent, and for the team to know they can trust me, to know the priorities.

- to be a team builder...
These statements do not draw on any one recognisable theory or view of leadership, but there is a strong “people” thread running through them, suggesting that the difficulties highlighted in stages 1 and 2 of the project work have been borne out, and should be reflected in a different focus of attention in the training given to this group of managers.

The scoring of sections (ii) and (iii) have revealed consistent scores across all four respondent groups. There is no time for “legacy building”, for “planning”, for “making time for people”, and for being a “visionary” when the most important aspects of the job or role are dealing with the day to day issues of people care and management. The scores across all four groups indicate that the priority is to ensure that the team is working well, that the focus is on the current project, and that all are able to function effectively.

In section (iii) the scoring by participants of the attributes which they think are the most difficult to display are all clustered around statements such as “a voice speaking for the whole team”, “responsive to others’ needs”, “making time for people”, “communicating a global vision”, “demonstrating an effective sense of humour” and “inspiring others through word, vision, and example”, with “supporting and developing others” and “undertaking, shaping and communicating future planning” coming close behind. This all suggests that the priorities of so-called “leadership” can change significantly according to the level at which it needs to be applied. The high scores are about integrity, trust, sharing information and dealing with poor performance – many of which are attributes associated with good management as much as leadership.

The personal statements focus centrally on the capacity and ability to work as a team, to be able to inspire and motivate, and to deal with the current rapid and thoroughgoing pace of change. The personal statements do support what has been found through the questionnaires, in that there is virtually no mention of the importance of transformational, leadership activities. The statements focus on the current issues of people management on a day-to-day basis.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This project has examined the behaviours that are required of individuals in the middle of an organisation. The current literature on distributed leadership addresses the condition of the organisation, the nature of its structure, and the assumption that “leadership” as a concept is displayed and demonstrated in the same way, whatever the level of participant. This project challenges this view by identifying and indicating that there are particular “leadership” behaviours that are more relevant to middle managers than they are to senior managers/directors or principals at the head of an organisation. It has sought to bring to the surface responses to “leadership” behaviour preferences, and to give middle managers themselves the chance to reference these against what they perceive their staff want them to do.
The results using the DTI questionnaire have proved remarkably consistent across all four groups who were asked to complete it. The degree of score differential is across a range, but consistently the notion of “team builder” comes out close to the top score in one direction, while the concept of “legacy building” appears at the bottom, or near the bottom, of the score in each case; in the case of two of the college groups, there is a significant gap at the bottom, where the attribute of “legacy builder” is considerably adrift from the other scores, while in the third group it is closer to a group of attributes considered less important. It was most interesting to find this position confirmed by the respondents from the (multinational) private sector group, who also placed “team builder” at the top of their list. This group was the only one to score the “visionary” attribute highly, which may suggest that the aims and objectives of the private sector group are better explained and communicated, and more clearly seen compared to the environment of Post 16 education and training where the difference between organisational aims and objectives and the perceived aims of professional teachers may be quite wide. The private sector group clearly enumerated the same concerns arising from project based work over short periods that time, priorities and team building are the most important factors in getting jobs done.

The second round of self-devised questionnaires helped to confirm the findings, namely that the core attributes required of middle managers are connected with team building, dealing with people, solving problems on a day to day basis, and ensuring that all are treated fairly and consistently, in the eyes of both their managers and their peers. The personal statements contributed by participants about their perceptions of their role and its relationship to “leadership” corroborate much of what has been derived from the questionnaires and the scoring. It underlines that it is neither sensible nor useful to assume that “leadership” means the same thing at all levels of the organisation.

The results of all three sections of the research suggest that Ofsted (1) may well be correct to consider that it is worth enquiring about “leadership” at all levels of the organisation, but that a good deal more definition and identification of both traits and behaviours may be needed to make the difference explicit. The “Leadership Framework” created by CEL (2004) ought to be reconsidered in the light of such results, since the four elements described as “Focus to achieve”, “Mobilise to impact”, “Sustain momentum” and “Passion for excellence” may be a long way from the personal aspirations and reflective behaviour of middle management understanding, and while “distributed leadership” is identified as one of the sub-routines of “Mobilise to impact”, the actual behaviours which are needed for this are very different once one gets down to the levels to which “leadership” may be distributed.
This research suggests two main recommendations for the consideration of training and development schemes for staff in the middle of FE organisations, as follows:

1. A fundamental re-assessment of what exactly the word “leadership” means, when it is applied to different levels of staff in an organisation. It is not a universally applicable definition. If “leadership” is to be “distributed” then this re-definition must be clearly communicated as a differential. The current use of the word “leadership” to apply in the same way at all levels of an organisation distorts the expected behaviours of those in the middle and leads to the inappropriate use of behaviours that are best left to those explicitly charged with creating the “vision”.

2. The training and development programmes for staff at the first stages of their career development, on the first “rungs” of the ladder, even in flattened hierarchies, should be reviewed and amended to recognise greater attention to the attributes identified by this project, namely team building, time prioritisation, engaging with the needs of their team members and acting with fairness and consistency at all times.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the Centre for Excellence in Leadership for funding this project. The author is indebted to 30 “Middle Managers” working at City College Brighton and Hove, Brighton, Hove and Sussex 6th Form College, and Varndean College, Brighton, and 10 middle manager “students” from the Open University Business School MBA programme, who volunteered to participate, as part of their elective module on Creativity, Innovation and Change, tutored by the author of this Project. The support of the three Principals of the Colleges has been invaluable in engaging staff in the project.

Notes

1. Paragraphs 276 and 277 of the “Ofsted Handbook for Inspecting Colleges” indicate that there is a role for “leadership” at all levels.


4. The DTI questionnaire is licensed to public sector users, through PSI Licence Holders: www.opsi.gov.uk/click-use/system/online/pListLicensees.asp.

References


Developing Shared Leadership: A hands-off approach

Sarah Watson, Blackburn with Darwin Borough Council

Executive Summary
This study describes how shared leadership is developed within a small middle management team in a local authority adult learning provider. It uses action research to identify how shared leadership can develop across team managers who have relatively distinct, independent teams and priorities. The study was conducted over a six-month period, during which time, the organisation, and the research team in particular, were subject to a number of changes that led to unanticipated outcomes. Rather than the sharing of outcomes being put forward as the key factors in developing shared leadership, the study shows the importance of relationship development in building a leadership team, and how circumstances necessitating co-dependence can stimulate this development. It concludes by suggesting that shared leadership development might require senior managers to ‘absent’ themselves from decision-making and other line management responsibilities in order for middle managers to turn to their peers and themselves for leadership. It also demonstrates how shared leadership can impact positively on the individual skills and confidence of managers.

Introduction
This is a study of the development of shared leadership within a local authority adult learning provider in the north of England. It uses data collected from action research conducted by a small team of middle managers and their senior manager (the researcher) over a period of approximately six months. The study was stimulated by the organisational need to develop the skills and capacities of middle managers to lead the organisation in ways that help to overcome considerable challenges faced by both the adult learning sector and local authority services.

Much attention has been paid to leadership and management within the FE sector in recent years, and as the teaching workforce has become more professionalised, so too have managers. Providers have borrowed much from the private sector in terms of performance management and organisational development, and recognition of the importance of effective leadership is just one aspect of this shift in organisational culture.

For adult education, the shift to a more performance-oriented culture has been significant. Changes to local government and education have significantly impacted on local authority learning providers in particular. The Gershon review (2004) signalled the need for local authorities to significantly reduce expenditure, making £21.5 billion of sustainable efficiency gains across the public sector in 2007/08, and of this total,
at least £6.45 billion would be achieved by local government in England. Coupled with the recent national evaluation of local government pay scales, this has led to ‘non-essential services’, such as adult learning services, having their local authority funding and support dramatically reduced. Furthermore, reforms in FE education and the more recent Leitch Report (2006) have left adult learning providers with a clear signal to either radically reduce or radically change the focus of their adult and community learning (ACL) provision. Therefore, the skills and abilities of those managing and leading organisations to ‘business plan’, ‘income-generate’, ‘reorganise’ and ‘strategically align’ are put under increasing pressure.

As adult learning providers become subject to the same rigours and pressures of the rest of the FE sector, quality and performance are also evermore critical. Under-performance against targets or the common inspection framework leads to the withdrawal of contracts, and any further opportunities to procure funding are subject to an open bidding process, necessitating the need for a strong track record. Managers have to drive their organisations to continuously improve quality, offer better ‘value for money’ and out-perform (i.e. compete) in what is essentially now the business of adult learning. At an organisational level this reinforces rapid and on-going change. The need to reorganise or restructure happens more frequently, and many organisations have recognised that flatter and more fluid structures help to mitigate against this need. For the individual employee or manager, however, the demands placed on them to change and develop are ever greater.

Further pressure comes from the ‘public’ nature of the public sector. Public sector organisations are expected to perform against private sector definitions of success but in the public arena. In other words, they must demonstrate value for money, effectiveness, quality and customer-focus and they are evaluated publicly on how they do this. Targets, outputs and measures of success are used to ensure ‘public value’, and managers have to somehow engage their staff in performing against these whilst only paying them a public sector wage. Their success or otherwise in doing this is also then available for any member of the public to scrutinise and question; and because often what a member of the public values (for example, free pottery classes for over 50s) differs to what the government values (for example, free numeracy classes for ex-offenders), managers are often playing a political as well as managerial role.

A final impact is that managers/leaders are tasked with developing a culture that is both collegial and supportive, yet high performing and business-oriented. Minimal resourcing necessitates collaboration amongst individuals and teams, flexibility of roles and ‘SMART’ working practices. At the same time, quality and volume of delivery need to improve continuously in order to compete for and retain contracts. Managers need the skills and abilities to lead their teams through these numerous demands, and current leadership and management theory often places organisational culture at the heart of the solution.
This study looks at how a management team can develop in order to meet these pressures and changing demands. The service in question faces all the challenges and pressures above, and this has led to the SMT evaluating how practices could be improved to deliver more effectively and further improve standards. In particular, they identified the need to develop improved leadership by middle management (compounded by the senior manager responsible for this team leaving and not being replaced) and to develop greater collaboration between delivery teams to better utilise resources in meeting targets. The aims of this study are, therefore, to:

- Identify key factors and practices which develop distributed, shared leadership amongst a management team;
- Critically evaluate the impact of this on individuals’ perceived leadership abilities and success.

Research Framework

Leadership and management theory has increasingly focussed on democratic, relational approaches, rather than traditional notions of top-down, single-point models. A range of theories and models has developed, such as ‘learning organisations’, complexity theory and transformational leadership, which place greater emphasis on culture and relationships, as opposed to systems and processes.

In recent years, a body of work has developed discussing the nature and merits of ‘distributed leadership’, and its close relations, ‘shared’ and ‘collaborative leadership’. The distinction and definitions of each are still open to debate, and offer a certain level of ambiguity and confusion. Jameson attempts to unpick the three models in her 2007 study of collaborative leadership, defining each as follows:

“The ‘distributed leadership’ model goes some way further than ‘shared leadership’ along the continuum towards fuller group engagement in leadership in specifying distribution of tasks and responsibilities, though not necessarily knowledge, power and authority[...it does not imply people necessarily work together to share the knowledge, power and authority of executive leadership.” (Jameson 2007: 11)

“…[collaborative leadership] signifies a process of working together...which requires sharing power, authority, knowledge and responsibility...”
(Jameson (2007: 11)

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1 This is not to say that they were left with no line management support. Rather, the head of service took line management responsibility for the managers but, due to her limited capacity, they agreed that her supervision of them would be minimal. The managers felt throughout the study that they should support the head of service by not turning to her for support, but rather they should turn to each other as far as possible.
“A common sense view is that ‘shared’ leadership implies more that one person exercising some degree of joint leadership[...]. The term does not necessarily include real sharing of power, authority and responsibility at different hierarchical levels[...]. In its more advanced development it may resemble ‘collaborative leadership’.” (Jameson 2007: 10)

Jameson appears to argue that the three models are a continuum of sorts, and that collaborative leadership reflects the most fully developed condition. However, taking a situational/contextual view of the three models may be closer to actual practice. All three could conceivably co-exist within an organisation or even within the same team at different times, and movement between the three may not be a linear line of development, but rather a response to changing circumstance and need. Conger and Pearce (2003), for example, discuss the contingency/situational nature and pose the question “Are crises likely to cause a shift from one form to another in the group?” (2003: 287). They also suggest that the influence of organisational culture, design and politics is under-researched.

In studying the development of these leadership models, much has been written about how distributed leadership is used as a model, particularly within educational settings. This study is focused on shared leadership development, as it was recognised that the organisation already displayed elements of distributed leadership, and the organisational need was to encourage middle managers to lead jointly and collaboratively to better utilise skills and resources. The study found that what developed more closely fits the definition of shared leadership than that of collaborative leadership.

The role of the person instigating shared leadership is discussed by a number of writers, including Conger and Pearce (2003); Seibert, Sparrowe and Liden (2003); and Shamir and Lapidot (2003). Houghton et al (2003) describe the need for the ‘vertical leader’ to actively facilitate and empower team members, developing their skills and confidence to take on leadership roles. They suggest that this vertical leader should take on the role of a ‘SuperLeader’ who:

“listens more and talks less, while asking more questions and providing fewer answers[...]. A SuperLeader strives to replace conformity and dependence[...]. with initiative, creativity, independence and interdependence.” (Houghton et al 2003: 134)

Their approach differs from that described by Seibert et al (2003), who put forward a role which structures and manipulates the social exchange relationships between group members. The vertical leader engineers and constructs the situation, whereas the model of Houghton et al is hands-off to the point that it might result in criticism of the leader in question:
“Leaders who choose a SuperLeadership approach may appear weak to some [...] that they are shirking their leadership responsibilities [...] SuperLeadership will often produce poorer results at first…”

(Houghton et al 2003: 134)

There is not necessarily a contradiction between the two approaches, however, one is concerned with the perceived activities of the vertical leader, whereas the other is concerned with the actual activities. Still, it raises the question that, if one takes the position that the vertical leader needs to empower through ‘stepping back’ in some way, how is this done without being criticised or, more crucially, without risking damage to the organisation in the meantime?

Conger and Pearce (2003) look at the relationship between vertical and shared leadership and postulate a number of questions worthy of closer study:

“Does the absence…of an enlightened vertical leader preclude the possibility of shared leadership from occurring in traditional team and organization settings? Alternatively, might it be possible to develop shared leadership without a vertical leader to initiate the process under certain conditions?” (Conger and Pearce 2003: 286-287)

The question of how the vertical leader leads shared leadership would appear to be crucial to its development. Houghton et al highlight the difficulty inherent in doing this:

“…a would be SuperLeader might say something like this: ‘Of course I trust you and empower you to handle this situation on your own. So go ahead and work on it […] And by the way, I would like you to check in with me every couple of hours.’ ” (Houghton et al 2003: 134)

Conger and Pearce suggest the need to investigate in what ways vertical leadership might act as a barrier to expressions of shared leadership, as well as the roles vertical leaders might play as catalysts or facilitators of shared leadership.

The role of the group members in the instigation of shared leadership is discussed by O’Toole, Galbraith, and Lawler (2003) who list key questions which need to be asked amongst the group at the start of such a process:

“What areas in the organization need our direct leadership in order for the corporation to succeed? How are we going to coordinate and communicate with each other so we don’t step on each other’s toes? and How can we make sure we send the same message?”

(O’Toole et al 2003: 260)
This study looks at how shared leadership can be developed, attempting to identify the key factors, actions and conditions which promote it in a particular context. It also evaluates the impact of shared leadership on how individual group members perceive their own abilities and success as leaders, and whether shared leadership can be a tool for personal development.

**Research Methods**

The research involved four middle managers and a subject leader. The original intention was to work with the four managers of the four service delivery teams. One of the managers at the beginning of the project, however, was acting in the post and returned to her substantive subject leader post when a new, permanent manager was appointed. Both the new manager and the subject leader continued with the research.

The researcher, who, at the start of the project was their senior manager, left the organisation early in the research period but continued the work at a distance. This configuration, and the changes therein, raise certain methodological questions, i.e. given that the newly appointed manager line managed the subject leader, were they each able to openly discuss and share issues of leadership? Did the line management relationship of the senior manager to the team put any pressure or obligation on them to participate? In terms of proximity, how objective was the researcher, and did leaving the organisation affect (either negatively or positively) the reliability and organisational impact of the findings?

Data was collected through two approaches – initial and summative assessments/questionnaires and action research including a series of workshops to aide reflection and planning. The questionnaires generated evidence of impact on individuals and the group, as well as a method for identifying factors that were perceived to have supported the development of shared leadership. Action research was chosen for a number of reasons:

- **The democratic nature of the research process** – Adelman (1993) describes action research as the ‘…systematic enquiry for all participants in the quest for greater effectiveness through democratic participation.’

- **It is a real-world, contextualised method appropriate to professional development** – Lewin (1946) argued ‘No action without research; no research without action.’ This sentiment is closely paralleled by Freire’s (1990) assertion that reflection without action leads to verbalism, and that action without reflection leads to activism. True praxis combines both action and reflection.

- **It develops collegiality and collaboration** – Fielding (1999) argued that vigorous dialogue and debate over actions is central to developing collegiality.
- *It reflects the existing culture of the service as a successful learning organisation* – Given the service’s organisational culture (as a learning organisation) and the research topic, action research as a participative, transformational, democratic approach ensures values can be aligned in several ways, aiming to eliminate what McNiff and Whitehead (2006) refer to as ‘living contradictions’.

This action research study generated significant quantities of qualitative data in the form of ‘workshop reports’. During workshops the team recorded their thoughts, discussions and ideas onto flipcharts in response to various planned questions and activities, whilst the researcher made further notes on comments made which might have otherwise not been captured. Each workshop was then written up as a report which the team were then given to review and evaluate, including any agreed actions for them to take forward before the next meeting.

Certain research activities were rejected due to circumstance. For example, a survey of the staff being managed by the research team was not conducted as it was felt that at a time of significant uncertainties in job security this would be both badly received and a skewed reflection of their opinions of leadership within the organisation. However, this decision may have been driven more by the reluctance of the researcher to cause any upset or bad feeling at a time when she felt uncomfortable about leaving the organisation, rather than out of any ethical or validity considerations.

The research group agreed at the beginning of the research that they would be as open as possible during workshops, and so they agreed that meaningful discussions would be supported by their ability to name individuals during workshops. In some cases, names or initials were recorded. All such references to individuals or any aspects that might make the organisation identifiable are removed from this report.
Research Findings

Impact on Individual Leadership

The study demonstrates a clear impact on how the individual group members perceived their own leadership abilities or attributes. All but two attributes showed improvement, the most positively affected being: courage, resolution and steadiness; and intelligence and judgment in action. In one workshop a member stated that shared leadership was ‘making them more effective leaders individually if not collectively’. In terms of the abilities of the group as a whole, there was a positive impact seen on their abilities to: conduct effective one-to-ones with their teams; and to communicate effectively (in particular, in being able to communicate ‘difficult messages’).

In discussion, these improvements were all seen to be closely related to one another, and all part of their improved ability to lead their teams through challenges and uncertainties during the time of the research. They felt more confident in how they communicated with their teams and how they were able to explain to them difficult decisions being made higher up in the organisation. One group member explained that because of their shared understanding and views, they knew that they would be giving a consistent message and that they were ‘singing from the same hymn book’.

For another, she felt more confident in meeting with her team as she felt reassured by the group that ‘just being there and saying what you can is helping’ and so did not avoid meeting with them as she might have done otherwise. They also felt that it was easier to give a difficult message if it was clearly a shared view of the leadership team, as they felt it was less open to challenge:

“We can give difficult messages to our teams as we discuss things openly between ourselves first so have greater confidence in what we are saying; and that we won’t be contradicted or say the wrong thing.”

Group member (workshop 4)

They were able to share ideas about how to communicate with individuals and teams. For example, they discussed how one group member alternated between formal and informal team meetings, so that open discussion could take place. They also agreed that they should ensure their messages were consistent to avoid confusion or friction between teams.

There was a lack of impact on the group’s abilities to: understand the needs of their team members; deal with people; motivate; and show positivity. However, their ability to motivate and show positivity were scored highly at the start of the research anyway, and the group felt that the fact they maintained this during such difficulties

2 The vast majority of staff (including the group members themselves) were facing significant salary cuts due to job evaluation, and the service was being remodelled in the coming months. This was resulting in low staff morale and many people seeking new jobs.

3 Although there was some positive impact on individual scores.

4 Both scored 8 out of 10.
demonstrated the positive impact of shared leadership.\textsuperscript{5} The group felt that one area where they would have liked to have seen significant improvement, but did not, was in their ability to challenge staff (which they linked to their skill in dealing with people). One group member explained this in the following way:

“\textit{We are challenging staff less because of everything that’s going on – but in a sense we are challenging more as we are having to keep staff focussed on work at a very difficult time.}” Group member (workshop 4)

Finally, the group agreed that the most significant impact on them as individuals was that it provided them with a peer support network. One group member commented that:

“\textit{[...] the group support and shared leadership is really helping in the present climate, with people under pressure and time being so short[...] things can be resolved immediately between us without becoming an issue.}” Group member (workshop 3)

This offers an interesting angle to the question posed by Conger and Pearce (2003) of whether ‘crises are likely to cause a shift from one form to another in the group’. It suggests at least two possibilities. Firstly, during a time of ‘crisis’, shared leadership might offer a solution of some sort and, secondly, shared leadership might avoid a crisis from occurring in the first place.

\textbf{Role of the ‘Vertical Leader’}

The role of the vertical leader in this study became of particular interest. The vertical leader (i.e. the researcher) left the organisation at the beginning of the research period, having been the senior manager responsible for line managing this particular management team. It is unclear, however, whether the impact of this was positive or negative. Some in the group felt that this led to a ‘lack of direction’ and that they were merely ‘treading water’, instead of moving forwards. They all agreed that having a sense of shared leadership and working more closely together was supportive and helping them under the circumstances, but that without having that ‘single point’ to go to, they were unable to make any real changes or develop their work further.

However, they also identified that because they did not have a ‘vertical leader’ to go to for advice or support, they turned to each other more often. In other words, it is possible that, had the vertical leader not left, their shared leadership would not have developed to the same degree. There were two significant events discussed by the group as examples of shared leadership which, if analysed and imagined with the vertical leader still in post, could have conceivably been dealt with very differently:

\textsuperscript{5} The score for ‘supportive yet challenging style’ increased from 6 to 7 out of 10.
Event 1

This event was recounted during the second workshop and involved three members of the group. Three members of staff (each in different teams) had a dispute about how a certain situation was handled. It resulted in accusations being made against one another. One of the team managers responsible for one of them was away, and so another team manager took it upon himself to talk to her team member and resolve the situation.

When discussing this in workshop 2, the three managers felt that had they not developed the relationships between themselves as a leadership team, the situation could have turned out very differently. The manager who resolved the situation explained how he’d felt confident that he could deal with another team member directly and in the way his colleague would have wanted – she concurred that this had been the case. Furthermore, the two team managers who were handling it described how they were concerned that it should be resolved before the third manager returned as they felt ‘protective’ of her and were keen that she did not return to work with the situation still needing to be addressed.

So how might this situation have turned out if the vertical leader had been there? Diagram 1(a) shows how the situation was handled as above, and 1(b) shows the likely scenario had there been a vertical leader to go to.

Diagram 1(a) shows how staff member A (St Mbr A) tells his line manager that he feels there is a problem with how staff member C has carried out her role (i). Manager A (Mgr A) informs the line manager responsible (ii), who discusses this with the staff member C who explains that she thinks it is the fault of staff member B. Line manager C decides that, given the line manager responsible is away, he will deal directly with staff member B to resolve the situation.

Diagram 1(b) shows how, had the vertical leader (VL) been present, the situation would have been escalated to her instead.
This event would appear to support the notion put forward by Houghton et al (2003) that the vertical leader might not empower managers as needed, and supports the suggestion by Conger and Pearce (2003) that the question of whether a vertical leader can hinder the development of shared leadership is a potential area for future research.

The second situation highlighted the success of their shared leadership even further, particularly as it coincided with a similar incident involving a team manager from outside of the research group, and which turned out very differently:

**Event 2**

*Within the same week, one of the managers was involved in two situations involving her team members and how other managers directed them. She described both during workshop 3 and realised how differently each turned out. She explained that this was because in the first situation she was able to discuss the problem quickly and effectively with the other manager due to the trust and understanding that had developed between them through the shared leadership research project. In the second situation, she felt unable to deal with it so easily because she did not have that relationship, even though she had worked with said manager for some time and she had thought they had a high level of trust and understanding.*

*The first situation is represented in diagram 2(a). Manager B asked staff member A (who is in Manager A's team) to take part in an event (i). However, staff member A was needed elsewhere and did not explain this to manager B. When manager A found out (ii), she immediately went to*
manager B and ‘confronted’ him (iii). What ensued was described by the group as something akin to a ‘marital tiff’, whereby they manager A laughingly ‘told off’ manager B, and the situation was resolved within minutes and with humour. Both managers explained during the workshop that at no point was there any sense that they disagreed or that they did not understand each other. They described a level of trust that allowed them to approach the situation with humour and confidence that it was not a problem between themselves, but rather a minor break in communication.

The second situation (represented in diagram 2(b)) involved the same manager A but with a third manager, manager C, who is not part of the research team. An issue arose whereby staff member A, who works in the office managed by manager C, was allowed to finish work early on various occasions, on agreement from her line manager, manager A (i). Manager C felt that this was causing friction between this staff member and her own team as it was seen as unfair. Manager C confronted manager A but they were unable to reach an agreement (ii). In fact, manager A described it as surprisingly difficult between them, considering she’d always thought they had a good working relationship. It resulted in manager A having to go to her line manager (the head of service) as she could see no way of resolving it directly (iii). The head of service (VL in this instance) intervened by having a meeting with the two managers (iv). Manager A described the meeting as lengthy (taking a number of hours) and difficult.

Manager A, workshop 3, was certain that had manager C been part of the shared leadership project, the second situation would have turned out similarly to the first – if, indeed, it would have occurred at all.
Relationships, Reflection and Process

During the final workshop (workshop 4), the group was asked to think through a number of questions aimed at drawing out how shared leadership can be developed. Three themes emerged particularly strongly – relationships, reflection and process.

Relationships. Event 2 described previously illustrates how their relationships played a significant role in their ability to work and lead together. The group, throughout the project and particularly in workshop 4, returned to the theme of their mutual trust, respect and understanding repeatedly. This was emphasised by their concern over a new person joining the group early in the research and a need for them to ‘like’ that person in order to build a relationship:

“No sure how this will affect the trust that has developed. This is soon dispelled when meeting her for the first time.” Group member (workshop 4)

The success of the Friday ‘breakfast’ meetings, the workshops and even sitting next to each other in the office, as opposed to other tools, also highlights the nature of the informal network being developed. They emphasised the importance of personalities and shared values, and the need for there to be time to get to know each other in this way:

“Personalities will have a big effect on whether this [developing a shared leadership style] is possible. The dynamics will have to be right.”

“….need to develop trust – shared understanding of personalities and individual strengths and weaknesses…” Group members (workshop 4)

Reflection. On undertaking an activity in workshop 4 asking them to create a ‘timeline’ of their development of shared leadership, the group identified a series of reflective practice meetings which took place two years previously, at the beginning of the process. They describe their Friday ‘breakfast’ meetings as a continuation of this:

 “[We] have to meet/have to have time to discuss/share/reflect.”
Group member (workshop 4)

This need for reflection was shown to be important when the group felt under pressure in workshop 3 to use the time to work on a specific operational task due to a pressing deadline. In the following workshop, they described it as a ‘less positive meeting’ as they had not made the most of ‘time away’ and ‘space’ to share ideas in the way they had in other workshops. When asked what one should avoid when developing shared leadership they said:

“…becoming too operational – make time for reflection.” Group (workshop 4)

6 The group highlighted that they needed the informality of being out of the office to talk openly enough to develop their relationships. The fortnightly meetings with the head of service originally put forward as a tool to develop shared leadership scored poorly in the group’s summative evaluation as they found them ‘too operational’, and not reflective enough.
Process. For the researcher, this was perhaps the most interesting, and unexpected, theme that emerged. The group expressed strongly, both through comments and through the evaluation of actions, tools and outcomes, that the development of shared leadership should be process-driven, rather than outcome-driven. One group member warned that senior managers should not use the development of shared leadership as a ‘management tool’; and that meetings aimed at developing the team should not be ‘hijacked’ or used to ‘manage’. They agreed that having a shared team plan, and that sharing targets and objectives was very useful, but not because of the outcome (i.e. the plan itself and resulting sharing of activities and responsibilities) but rather because of the discussions which took place and the level of understanding that developed.

These three themes pose a number of challenges for vertical leaders. It appears that the vertical leader needs to allow space, time and freedom for shared leadership to develop, which contradicts the ‘SMART’ methods and tools traditionally used to lead or manage. It may be that in this instance, the actual physical absence of the vertical leader enabled this to happen in a way that it might not have, had the researcher not left. The pressure on the vertical leader to manage and lead differently\(^7\), with clearer direction and outcomes, would almost certainly have meant the research would have developed differently. Furthermore, the research process may have allowed or justified the time spent on less formal workshops and meetings. In the day-to-day running of an organisation, such activity is viewed as expensive and low priority. Action research, as a reflective process, seems to have been the very ‘tool’ required for shared leadership to develop.

Conclusions

This single case study research project suggests ideas and conditions which might be implemented, explored and tested further in order to derive a set of principles for how shared leadership can be developed. These ideas and conditions can be summarised as follows:

- **Shared leadership develops individual leadership ability.** The confidence of individuals and their self-awareness, along with the ability to share and learn from each other, makes the development of shared leadership an effective means of improving the leadership of those individuals involved. As such, greater emphasis should perhaps be placed on peer networking within and across organisations. The research showed, however, that this networking requires time and also for those involved to have the ability to engage in a reflective process.

\(^7\) A pressure felt not necessarily from the organisation, but as much from the individual herself, as she would not want to appear ‘weak’ (Houghton et al, 2003).
- **A vertical leader can act as a barrier to the development of shared leadership.** The role of the vertical leader is as much about absenting themselves from responsibility as it is about supporting the process. Given how difficult this would be under ‘normal’ circumstances, it suggests the need to look more closely at the role of the vertical leader and how one might create a sense of ‘absence’ without creating a sense of ‘abandonment’ or even negligence.

- **Relationships, reflection and process should be the focus, over tools or outcomes.** Shared leadership is dependent on the ‘intangible’ networks and relations of the individuals involved, and these are best developed in an environment which allows the space and freedom for group reflection and learning to take place. This cannot be closely planned or focussed on the operational management issues of the time, but rather the group need to feel self-directed and able to talk openly and relatively informally.

Further research might take a comparative approach to how shared leadership develops under different conditions. One might also compare the impact of shared leadership on organisational outcomes or success, as well as on individual leadership ability.

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**References**


Executive Summary

This report presents the findings from an action research project carried out by the WEA West Midlands region designed to explore strategies to involve part-time and geographically dispersed tutors within curriculum development activities. The aim of this practitioner research was to identify ways to engage tutors in developing the Visual, Performing Arts and Media (VPAM) curriculum management area. From the beginning, the concept of distributed leadership worked well in theory but took longer to set up in practice. The research revealed several pre-requisites for engaging part-time tutors in the curriculum leadership and development process. In particular, tutors had to be empowered to take charge of the task and ownership of the curriculum development activity. This was a key pre-requisite for the successful implementation of distributed leadership and was fundamental to giving tutors the liberty to use their expertise and experiences as they perceived necessary. This empowerment was important to give tutors the confidence to be leaders, and also to reduce a top down approach to a curriculum leadership and development task. The task was something that tutors had invested their ‘hearts and minds’ in and was not something that was done to them via a top down approach common to many distributed leadership strategies.

Introduction

A recent study of part-time tutors in the learning and skills sector commented ‘The psychological contract between teachers and learners is rich, but the one between the institution and the part-time teacher is too often impoverished’ (Hillier and Jameson 2004). This conclusion is starkly stated but is recognisable and represents a significant challenge for leaders in adult education. It is important those part-time tutors’ perceived needs are met and that they engage with the institution, contributing their expertise, and knowledge of and commitment to their students. Securing this engagement is quite complex as the course tutors are geographically dispersed, have a range of demands on their time and have only a limited contractual commitment to the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA). Thus it will need a recognition that ‘True leadership only exists if people only follow when they have the freedom not to’ (Collins 2006).
The WEA has traditionally provided geographically based leadership of course tutors but has recently complemented this with regional curriculum leadership. This model has had some success in building teams that share ideas and experiences. This project arose from discussion with team members in the Visual Performing Arts and Media (VPAM) area and therefore attempted to investigate (through documentary and focus group methods) the experience of part-time tutors in one curriculum area in order to identify improvement and potential tutor leaders. In addition it wanted to pilot (following consultation and consent from tutors) a collaborative curriculum development project involving tutors and students from across the region. This builds on a successful multi-media project in a local area ("Telford Experience").

Following a successful re-inspection in 2005, the WEA West Midlands was seeking to renew its curriculum offer and make a distinctive contribution to the changing post-16 learning and skills landscape. Visual and Performing Arts and Media is an important curriculum area (in 2006/07 in West Midlands 130 courses in 20+ locations). The curriculum area has considerable scope to develop making it more coherent and focused; offering greater vocational and occupational pathways to students from a wide range of backgrounds.

This action research examined the pre and post curriculum leadership experiences of tutors within the VPAM curriculum area. The diversity of the curriculum area, the multiplicity of tutor expertise coupled with the geographical dispersal of VPAM tutors had limited tutor collaboration and involvement in curriculum development in the past. This research aimed to track the process leading up to the collaborative curriculum development task through documentary analysis, focus group interviews and questionnaires. The bottom up approach to distributed leadership planned to build flexibility, adaptability and a professional trust in the tutor leaders. It consequently attempted to reveal whether the strengthened collaboration and engagement of the tutors in a conjoined curriculum task would foster networks of learning, promote innovation and capture new knowledge from tutors to build capacity within the VPAM curriculum leadership. The action research approach provided a suitable avenue to challenge critically the process and evaluate the curriculum development task step by step to make explicit the progression and development made, as well as tracking tutor perceptions and experiences along the way. The critical reflection and documentation of this curriculum development task through the action research process may encourage other curriculum areas or WEA regions to consider the practice based research of curriculum development in their respective curriculum areas.

In order to do this effectively, the following research questions were formulated:

- How can distributed leadership secure tutor engagement in arts and media and curriculum development?
- What can course tutors contribute to curriculum leadership?
- Does practice based research help build curriculum leadership?
- How far are experiences in this project transferable to other curriculum areas and regions?
Research Framework

The WEA West Midlands region offers a diverse range of courses within the VPAM curriculum with some courses even over-lapping into other curriculum areas. Moreover, the tutors teach in geographically dispersed areas within the region; a distinctive trait of a college without walls. The tutors have a broad range of skills and expertise within their respective subjects which range from singing to botanical illustration. The fusion of tutors’ expertise in both a theoretical and practical sense through a collaborative task was therefore envisaged to build leadership skills and secure their involvement in VPAM curriculum development.

The core purpose of educational leadership is to cultivate meanings of learning, communities of learning, responsibility for learning, and have a clear focus on enabling and supporting teaching (Lingard, Hayes, Mills & Christie, 2003; Starratt, 2003). Leadership and management are two notions that are often used interchangeably. However, these words actually describe two different concepts. Management typically involves the directing of structures, people, targets and resources, while leadership is setting a new direction or vision for a group that they can follow (Starrat, 2003).

The focal point of this research is distributed leadership which provides an alternative to the superman/woman approach to leadership involving one person making all the decisions and delegating tasks to other members of staff. It involves the delegation of leadership responsibilities and power and not merely leadership tasks and operations to other competent staff members, thus creating a team of leaders that divide up the leadership activities and leadership roles (Harris, 2005). Distributed leadership in education can also involve the explicit use of tutor leaders to provide functions of instructional leadership, curriculum development, staff development and staff mentorship, (Ibid) Distributed leadership structures sometimes (but not always) include the use of incentives to support staff members taking on these additional responsibilities but it is more about ‘hearts and minds’ as a leader can lead people without having managing responsibility (Nashashibi and Watters, 2003). Thus, the underlying importance of having the autonomy and freedom to be able to decide whether to take on a leadership role or not is what makes it most effective and sustainable and more importantly different to delegation. Distributed leadership therefore means “multiple sources of guidance and directions, following the contours of expertise in an organisation, made coherent through a common culture” (Harris, 2004).
Typically, educational leadership follows a top down hierarchical structure, and often the delegation of tasks from leadership can be confused with distributed leadership (Lumby, 2003). The lack of a concrete definition for what distributed leadership constitutes has exacerbated the perplexity that surrounds it. Therefore, for the purpose of this project Harris’s definition will be employed which states: “Distributed leadership concentrates on engaging expertise wherever it exists within an organisation rather than seeking this only through formal position or role….distributed leadership therefore, means multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contours of expertise in an organisation made coherent though a common culture” (Harris, 2004:14).

There have been proven benefits of distributed leadership within education and in particular distributed leadership through increased tutor leadership. Hopkins (2001) advocates that tutor leadership is a long term investment in curriculum development, organisational change and improvement. It has been evidenced by research (Young, 1999, Briggs 2001, Harris 2004) that distributed leadership can actually increase staff morale and build capacity within the organisation but the effects of distributed leadership on student achievement and learning are still debatable and the scarcity of research around distributed leadership in action has left a gap in knowledge of its benefits beyond the strategic level of the organisation (Wallace, 2002).

The Common Inspection Framework (CIF) and Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI)/Ofsted inspection reports advocate the need for improvement in curriculum development across many educational providers (CIF, 2005). Therefore, as a Curriculum Area Leader’s (CAL) role becomes more multifaceted and management, bureaucracy and accountability intensify, the need for greater input from highly experienced and skilled tutors to develop the curriculum using distributed leadership also increases. For example, a CAL’s “short list” of priorities consists of guiding the education efforts of students and tutors, as well as dealing with partner organisations and overseeing the accreditation of students and reporting of data/results. On top of which it also includes determining education programs and curriculum and carrying out Observations of Teaching and Learning (OTL). Given these responsibilities and the understanding that the working week of a part-time CAL is typically half a day a week, innovative approaches looking to provide an explicit structure for distributed leadership within adult education through having a collaborative curriculum development task was anticipated to build leadership capacity within the existing ways of working. This type of approach has been documented to detangle the confusing intermingling of the management of structures and systems with the leadership of the curriculum (Nashashibi and Watters, 2003).

Another crucial issue this research attempted to understand and work towards remedying is the geographical and institutional isolation of sessional or part-time tutors who are teaching within the community setting. Part-time and or sessional tutors tend to be stretched and time poor, hence the need to engage them with the curriculum and indeed the educational institution becomes even greater in a college without walls. Tutor engagement, thus becomes imperative to subsequent development strategies such as a collaborative approach to curriculum development,
sharing good practice, identifying and providing appropriate support for tutors and opportunities to participate in leadership activities (Marland et al, 2007). However generally there is a lack of research indicating successful ways to secure sessional tutor engagement in curriculum development. This practitioner project has identified an approach which was most suitable initially to engage tutors in curriculum development and leadership activities and more importantly attempted to find ways of maintaining that engagement beyond the project.

Research Methods

The action research used a qualitative, multi-method approach informed by an interpretive strategy. It rests on the notion that the differences between people and the objects of natural science need to be respected and therefore requires the researcher to grasp the subjective meaning of social action (Schutz, 1962). This approach enabled the uniqueness of the context to be investigated and participants’ thoughts and perceptions to be treated sensitively. The aim of this approach is not to test a hypothesis or model, or to make any generalisations, but to describe a particular context. The triangulation of methods allowed for greater confidence in the findings through focus group interviews, questionnaires and content analysis of official documents all acting as corroborators to the action research process (Fielding and Schreier, 2001).

The methods used included:

- Focus group interviews/event planning meetings
- Tutor questionnaires
- Participant observation of tutor planning meetings
- Official documentary analysis from private sources: qualitative content analysis

Action research can be described as a family of research methodologies which pursue action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time (Hart and Bond, 1995). Its application in the project was to facilitate collaborative working between the researcher and the participants using a cyclic process which alternates between action and critical reflection and in the later cycles, continuously refining methods, data and interpretation in the light of the understanding developed in the earlier cycles (Bryant, 2001).

The participants in the action research consisted of part-time or sessional tutors employed by the WEA to teach in the VPAM area. The focus group consisted of 8 tutors who have been involved in the project from the outset and who initially suggested the idea of collaborative working on an exhibition. In addition to the interviews, to ensure the notion of distributed leadership was followed through, all the remaining VPAM tutors were also briefed on the project objectives and given a questionnaire to voice their thoughts. This was used to supplement the data from the focus group meetings. It also allowed absent tutors’ ideas to be accounted and discussed at the focus group. The final method utilised in the research was the
qualitative content analysis of a range of documents including: Observation of Teaching and Learning (OTL) forms, Tutor feedback forms, Curriculum Area Team (CAT) meeting minutes, news letters, and tutor evaluations of meetings/training events. The documentary analysis complimented the other methods employed by allowing comparisons to be made between the data obtained from the questionnaires and focus group interviews and the data from the documents (Mayring, 2000). The documents were used to extrapolate evidence of curriculum development, distributed leadership and innovation or any factors which might have prevented effective curriculum development through tutor leadership to occur. Nevertheless, due attention was given to Scott’s (1990) evaluation criteria including the credibility, representativeness and meaning of the document prior to approaching the analysis.

The following activities were undertaken in the action research process:

- VPAM document content analysis (includes OTLs, Tutor feedback/evaluations/ CAT meeting minutes/VPAM news letters/letters by tutors to curriculum area leader (CAL).

- 2 Focus Group Interviews and planning meetings with 8 VPAM tutors (theme of exhibition decided upon collaboratively).

- Initial tutor questionnaires (32 distributed, 10 returned).

- 3 teleconferences to monitor and evaluate exhibition planning process.

- Evaluation questionnaire to tutors involved in the exhibition (4 completed).

Undertaking research in a relatively small, familiar environment, such as within the workplace has its advantages. For example being familiar with the local culture and customs and having already established a relationship provides the opportunity for the researcher to gain participants easily and to be privy to ‘insider’ information that would not be trusted to a stranger. Yet being known has its shortcomings too. Prior knowledge, underlying personal bias and preconceived ideas can render disadvantages to this intimate type of ‘insider research’ (Mercer, 2007).

The project used a single researcher (not a VPAM tutor or curriculum leader) to carry out the documentary analysis and facilitate and evaluate the focus group discussions and key findings overall. Furthermore the researcher was a member of staff in the organisation, and therefore had the advantage of being aware of the structures, ethos and systems of the organisation. More importantly the distance from the sessional tutors allowed some degree of objectivity throughout the research and enabled the discussions and issues arising to be contextualised into the wider/strategic organisational setting (Burgess, 1984).
Nevertheless it had to be ensured that the tutors participating in the project were actively involved in the research process, and similarly the researcher also had to be an active participant in the exhibition planning and delivery process from the outset to documenting and evaluating the whole process. Thus the action research methodology complimented this type of practitioner research. As the application of action research in this project was to find a way to sustain tutor engagement in curriculum development tasks, the practical understanding gained around this issue was somewhat more important than developing a general theory and principles. Consequently the recommendations have attempted to document the current good practice as well as the ways forward for future curriculum leadership and development.

The main research barrier was the geographical distance between tutors and the sessional tutors’ scarcity of time, which made it difficult to organise face-to-face focus groups or even individual interviews with the tutors. This was somewhat of a “Catch 22 situation” as attempting to tackle this barrier was the very objective of this research project. This could only be resolved through teleconferencing and also sending tutors open-ended questionnaires to complete in their own time. Thus the action research methodology required some flexibility to be able to control unforeseen problems and find solutions which bridge communication gaps between tutors and the researcher.

**Research Findings**

A pre-existing framework was not used as it was difficult to predict which factors, if any, would emerge from the data. As completed questionnaires were analysed, quotations were recorded within emergent category headings. Once the key ideas had been identified from the questionnaire and the documentary analysis, focus group interviews were used to probe for further and additional information. The findings from the research were divided into the following themes:

a) **Leadership support to engage sessional tutors in curriculum development**

Research from secondary literature and from the data obtained in this project indicate the need for clear and structured support from the Curriculum Area Leader as necessary components in the process of building capacity within curriculum development and management. Evidence indicates that management or leaders in education are too often seen as strategic bureaucrats taking on the role of managing people, funds and targets. This strategic focus of leadership in education can have a knock on effect on the people and activities being managed, who too can get lost in paperwork and the meeting of targets. There is an abundance of literature on effective management and leadership within the business/private sector which advocate innovation, creativity, dynamism and capacity building techniques, but shortage in resources and ‘old school’ ways of working in adult education have restricted innovative leadership which uses a multiple level or bottom up approach (Watters and Casey, 2006). The interviews, questionnaires and collaborative working on the action research by the tutors
revealed a high degree of creativity, imagination and passion on the part of the tutors in their subject areas, but too frequently the pressures on their time were restricting their ability to be engaged in curriculum development,

“It was great to have support from the Programme Area Manager (PAM) who was very supportive during the run up to the event.” (Tutor)

“As tutors, who have leadership experience within the classroom and not in this type of task and event, the support from the PAM/CAL was extremely beneficial to build our confidence in the early stages….but the support and encouragement remained throughout the project and has provided us with a great learning experience for the future.” (Tutor)

Therefore, the uniqueness of this project (to plan a regional art exhibition) lay in the bottom up approach it adapted, which has from conception been a product of tutors’ suggestions and ideas. Thus the leadership support in facilitating this process of curriculum development through distributed leadership has been a key strength.

At the start, the concept of distributed leadership entailed all the right ingredients for tutor led curriculum development through collaborative work to manifest, but the process took longer to establish than anticipated. Tutors’ comments in their course reports and evaluations demonstrated breadth in tutors’ imagination, ideas and expertise within their individual subjects, but in the past it has been difficult to extend that expertise outside their individual islands of work. This had left a legacy of autonomous and isolated working among tutors which was a point consistently noted in tutors’ comments during interviews and in documentary analysis. The tutors have contact with the curriculum area leader when needed or during teaching observations and there is some contact with fellow tutors at curriculum area team meetings. But on the whole the independent working among tutors coupled with contractual and time constraints on part-time/sessional tutors who more often than not have many other commitments has created an ethos of self-sufficiency. In this context, collaborative and developmental work was difficult to initiate,

“The experience of being involved in the project helped to reinforce the feeling of being part of a team. Sometimes the WEA teaching can lead to a feeling of being geographically isolated. Being part of the project alongside curriculum leaders was a positive experience building working relationships and becoming more familiar with colleagues.” (Tutor)

This needed careful guidance and support from the leadership as well as a re-emphasis of the bottom up approach and the fact that the project was facilitated by the curriculum area leader but ultimately led by them (the tutors).
b) Effective planning and resource allocation for sessional tutors’ expenses

Restricted manoeuvrability within the voluntary education sector can be the product of diminishing and constrained resources from the LSC and the target and outcome dependant resources from other funders (TES 2007). This red tape can confine a large extent of resource allocation to the indispensable aspects of the organisation with little left over for innovative projects. Therefore, securing additional funds is a necessary means to establish more sustainable engagement of tutors within curriculum development and simultaneously building leadership capacity within the organisation. Tutors’ main concern over becoming more involved in curriculum development was the WEA not having the means to fund their participation and time in this type of additional activity.

“I am a sessional tutor with the WEA but I also have another part-time job and many home commitments, I am very happy to take part in curriculum development and leadership activities but I need to know that my scarce time is being paid for….I think that is the main barrier for me and I’m pretty certain other tutors are affected by similar issues." (Tutor)

“I can’t do an activity for free, if that is what is required I am too busy to take that time out of my paid work as I need to pay the bills." (Tutor)

Nevertheless, it soon became apparent that practitioner action research may help to reduce costs through constant evaluation to identify the project’s effectiveness, sustainability and its transferability to other projects and areas, and thus acting as a framework or pilot to future projects (Brown and Jones 2001). This project evolved into a practical learning experience for all the parties involved, as the research process has enabled tutors to be reflective and be actively involved in the process of collaborative curriculum development.

Applied strategy in the research process

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<th>Problem/Issue</th>
<th>Diagnosis</th>
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The application of the above strategy helped tutors to exercise their management and leading skills, which for many were latent in their day to day work as part-time and/or sessional tutors. The focus group interviews and planning meetings revealed the multitude of ideas that tutors had, often resulting in some meandering discussions for which initially some chairing was needed by the curriculum area leader or the researcher. To remedy this, it was agreed that for the forthcoming focus group meetings an information/guide with key discussion points would be distributed to tutors to ensure the project remained the focus of the meetings and the discussions would not be hijacked by other technical, domestic, social or non-project related topics. Therefore, it was essential with the time constraints on the project, to re-visit the action plan and research questions periodically, to ensure tutors saw the project as an action research project and not
a mere art exhibition event. The clarification benefited the subsequent meetings as tutors arrived at the meetings having reflected over the work they had done and equipped with evaluative points and suggestions for moving forward.

c) **Having a consistent collaborative work message and ethos**

The indication from the documentary analysis was that tutors want more ‘networking’ ‘collaboration’ and ‘working with other subject areas’ but these suggestions have failed to materialise in the past due to the small number of tutors who attend the quarterly Curriculum Area Team meetings and the difficulty to thus put ideas into action. Nevertheless, tutors who attended the meetings have given positive feedback and it was here that the concept of collaborative curriculum development was first suggested by tutors. In addition to this, the newsletter that is circulated to tutors by the CAL has been a good source of communication, demonstrated through tutor evaluations and comments at the interviews; as it has enabled remote course tutors to remain in the communication loop.

Moreover, it was the source in which ‘The Telford Experience’ (an exhibition about Telford’s Industrial Heritage) was reported on and consequently sparked an interest in the tutors in the VPAM curriculum area to be involved in a similar collaborative curriculum development exercise. This vital mixture of good communication and sharing good practice in education, removes the competitive, cut-throat and segregated notions of working (Claricoates et al, 2007). The VPAM curriculum area has many tutors who are keen on sharing ideas and open to receiving fresh impetus from other tutors. Overall, the consensus among tutors was that collaborative working is a valuable addition to their teaching and learning but a web of barriers to its implementation exist in the form of distance, tutors’ other engagements, the short term nature of some contracts and unfamiliarity with a number of tutors who fail to attend the CAT meetings.

> “The newsletter helps to keep you updated but face to face meetings with other tutors are better when we all come together… I think I knew quite a few VPAM tutors before the event but I didn’t know them on a working basis… Tutors knew me but no-one really knew what I taught, how I taught or my style of teaching anymore than I knew of other tutors.” (Tutor)

> “At the CAT meetings we might have half an hour round the table discussion about what we do but the nature of that was quite abstract and the exhibition task enabled us to actually see what other tutors do.” (Tutor)

Therefore the consistency in the message of a shared work ethos was integral to establishing tutors’ confidence in working together particularly since this way of working has been limited in the past due to issues of practicality. Initially this message had to be emphasised by the CAL as tutors expected the CAL to lead them and guide them in this activity. The notion of shared working was relatively easy to establish, but the idea of distributed leadership took longer to set up. After
reflecting on this, tutors found they had strong localised leadership skills within their classes/subjects, but the time constraints and other commitments had forced them to follow the top down approach to working within the VPAM curriculum area. In subsequent discussions and reflections, tutors found that the localised leadership skills could be adapted within the distributed leadership framework and tutors can each bring their own expertise and experience to the project whilst adhering to the requisites of the collaborative task.

“Course tutors are an important middle ground and are able to relay thoughts to curriculum leadership from learners and back.” (Tutor)

“I would call myself a leader when I am teaching my course and this particular leadership experience has been useful in teaching me to work with other tutors/leaders collaboratively…..and I do feel that this task has enabled not only the VPAM tutors but also the learners from the different courses to unite and get inspired by the diverse teaching that goes on. It was a real eye opener.” (Tutor)

d) Empowering sessional tutors and valuing their contributions and experience

Typically, curriculum changes have been introduced via a top down approach, (Jones and Anderson, 2006) but as VPAM tutors are involved with curriculum change at a local level, a bottom up approach seemed more suitable. The tutors in this project have had autonomy within their own subject areas so it was integral to value this diverse range of experience and empower tutors to find solutions and effective ways of working together.

Tutors had to be reminded that they were the pivotal pillars behind the planning, co-ordination and delivery of the project and the decision making ultimately relied on their shared agreement. In initial meetings the CAL was perceived to be the decision maker and organiser of the exhibition, which had to be addressed quite early in the project to prevent the notion of distributed leadership being a mere euphemism for delegation. After evaluating early meetings/interviews and circulating the summary and notes, it became imperative that a strategy for empowering tutors to take ownership of the project was needed. Hence at the subsequent focus group interview it was initially agreed that the CAL would not be involved in these discussions and the researcher would chair/facilitate the discussion. This was thought to allow tutors to actually take charge of the collaborative curriculum development task, and recognise that they were the driving force behind its outcome. In later planning meetings however, the CAL’s presence in the meetings was in a facilitator’s role rather than a leader’s role and tutors were able to recognise that. The CAL’s facilitation helped to gel the geographically dispersed tutors together, by helping to negotiate and arrange meeting times and venues. However the meeting agendas were usually open and tutors led the direction of the discussions and planning.
“I would say the support from the CAL was more logistical and motivational and the actual curriculum development and planning for the exhibition was led by us tutors, after all it had to be that way as we in turn had to sell the idea to our students who ultimately produced the work for the exhibition.” (Tutor)

“Getting tutors from the different parts of the region to work together was a challenge but we managed to do it which speaks volumes about the tutors’ commitment once they are given the right opportunities.” (Tutor)

e) Reducing practical barriers through careful planning and having leadership freedom

The practical barriers of time and distance were interwoven in the project from the outset. This made the task even more challenging to facilitate as tutors had to be consulted about their availability and venue preferences before agreeing meeting/focus group interview dates to ensure every effort was made to reduce these practical barriers as much as possible. Furthermore, to guarantee effective use of tutors’ limited and precious time for the project, planning meetings and various communications had to be well organised with a clear agenda and objectives, that tutors worked collectively in putting together. This freedom in leadership was vital in indicating to tutors the trust that the CAL placed in the tutors’ ability to work together in trying to overcome practical barriers common for many of them. This required tutors to use the key problem solving approach in action research outlined above, where they had to find a solution to the problem in question through diagnosis and subsequently evaluate this solution.

“Although we are able to solve minor problems ourselves, really we needed to have some contingency planning so that we could solve the bigger problems but having said that time was also quite tight. I think that is a lesson we have learned for the future.” (Tutor)

The CAL could only facilitate this process of communication and strategic steering but the responsibility of problem solving lay in the hands of the tutors via collaborative discursive means. This became an effective tool for tutors to reflect on their work life balance and give consideration and precedence to careful planning in curriculum leadership tasks. Finally, the evaluative nature of the action research documented the various stages of the project, meetings and tutor experiences which supported tutors to quickly identify problems and solve them prior to their escalation.
Conclusions

The objective of this project was to secure tutor engagement to supplement curriculum development within the VPAM curriculum area of the WEA West Midlands. The collaborative curriculum development task involved planning and organising a regional art exhibition to publicise VPAM students’ work. Furthermore, the exhibition project was used as a means to strengthen collaborative working among the tutors as well as tackling practical barriers impinging on tutors’ ability to be more involved in curriculum development through a distributed leadership approach. As demonstrated from the analysis of VPAM documents and tutors’ participation in the project, the VPAM tutors have extensive experience and skills in teaching their respective subjects, but this has not always been utilised effectively to benefit all the parties involved. Consequently, the action research attempted to provide a vital learning tool to enable the project to have a multi-beneficiary framework, benefiting the tutors, the VPAM curriculum offer and possibly other curriculum areas.

Action research is a key tool that allowed the tutors to problem solve and work together to develop the curriculum and build their leadership skills. There are almost 30 part-time or sessional VPAM tutors, all tutors were sent out questionnaires to complete which captured their ideas and input to the collaborative curriculum development task (the regional art exhibition). The response rate to the questionnaires was quite poor (28%), so the focus group meetings (with 8 tutors in total) and the participant observation were used as the main focus with some input from questionnaire responses. Nevertheless, absent tutors were kept in the communication loop and any contribution they chose to make to the curriculum development task was welcomed. In addition the qualitative content analysis of OTL reports, tutor course reports, tutor evaluations and CAT minutes and newsletters facilitated the interview data in providing useful background data on tutors’ teaching and learning within their subjects and opportunities available for curriculum development to the tutors.

From the beginning the concept of distributed leadership worked well in theory but took longer to set up in practice as tutors’ part-time, peripheral and remote experiences of working in the VPAM curriculum area were somewhat more dominant and embedded. After solving this issue through the absence of the VPAM curriculum area leader from focus group interviews, tutors took ownership of the project direction and task of collaborative curriculum development. The action research process revealed several key findings. Firstly; the expertise, experience and enthusiasm tutors have in their subject areas and the difficulty to channel and draw that out due to the barriers of practicality. Through trial and error, tutors were able to
arrange mutually convenient ways of working, nevertheless due to time restrictions much of this process had to be facilitated by the researcher and the curriculum area leader.

Secondly, the research process revealed that there are several pre-requisites to engage part-time tutors in the curriculum leadership and development process; despite the expertise and experience of tutors within their subjects. These pre-requisites included having leadership support to deliver the message that leaders can operate outside the conventions of the red tape. Also it is imperative to have carefully designed action plans and resources to enable tutors to be involved in collaborative curriculum development and not a mere leadership delegation activity. Furthermore, where tutors are working autonomously with limited contact with the educational provider, the collaborative work ethos to be circulated consistently is even more paramount. This notion had to be re-emphasised somewhat as the task of the regional art exhibition was initially perceived by tutors as just a vehicle to display their students’ work on a common theme and not a synergy of tutors’ experiences, leadership, planning and evaluating skills through a reflective action research process.

Therefore, in order for this to be effective, tutors had to be empowered to take charge of the task and ownership of the curriculum development activity. This was a key pre-requisite for the notion of distributed leadership which was fundamental to giving tutors the liberty to use their expertise and experiences as they perceived necessary. This empowerment was important for two reasons: to give the tutors the confidence as leaders, and also to reduce a top down, prescribed and pedantic approach to a curriculum leadership and development task. The latter was important to secure the engagement of the tutors in curriculum development as the task was the tutors’ idea from origin and hence gave incentive and drive to tutors to develop and implement this idea. Therefore, the task was something that they had invested their ‘hearts and minds’ in and was not something that was done to them via a top down approach common to many distributed leadership strategies. In addition, having allocated resources for tutors’ time/expenses and creating a premise for tutors to take ownership of the task from the very start were vital in reducing some of the practical barriers, as tutors’ interest and commitment in the task led them to plan their time and prioritise their activities.

Along with identified good practice there are also lessons to be learned from this action research project for the organisation in terms of curriculum development tasks and certainly for the distributed leadership approaches which are outlined in the recommendations below.
Recommendations

- The initial engagement of sessional/part-time tutors is difficult in a geographically dispersed organisation. The process requires a needs assessment and a systemic approach towards remuneration of tutor expenses and a gradual acculturation of tutors to the organisation.

- A practical task produces a time efficient and reflective vehicle for curriculum development as well as creating an avenue for trial, error and evaluation in which the tutors are collectively and proactively involved.

- The concept of exhibiting learners’ work/achievements is universal to most curriculum areas but needs to be tutor led from the outset with a consistent collaborative work message.

- Securing additional or external funds to sustain tutor engagement in curriculum development is particularly significant for tutors with sessional or temporary contracts with the educational organisation and should be factored into similar tasks replicated in the future.

- If additional funding for practice based research is sought, the initial time planning process may require consultations with the participants/tutors involved to gauge the time frame by the tasks for effective planning and execution of the tasks.

- A devolved curriculum budget which is distributed across the curriculum based on tutor consultations will empower tutors to be more involved in leadership activities and curriculum development and more importantly feel engaged with the educational institution.

- Tutors should be empowered to take ownership of curriculum development activities by giving them leadership roles and not merely leadership operations.

- The notion of winning ‘hearts and minds’ in distributed leadership is vital in giving potential tutor leaders the power and freedom to be a leader because they choose to be and not because it is a delegated task from management.

- For long term tutor engagement, curriculum development and distributed leadership tasks need to be continued beyond the practice based research. The research evaluation from the practice will be an instrumental starting point which is documented and recorded at every phase.

- Realistic and fair expectations need to be made about the work load of part-time or sessional tutors and there also needs to be recognition that sessional tutors should be able to hold additional allowances to take part in curriculum development activities for the institution.

- Curriculum area leaders need to have strategies in place for keeping part-time/sessional tutors informed about activities and work of fellow tutors in the curriculum area via newsletters, curriculum forum or good practice sharing meetings.
- Sessional tutors need equality of access to continuing professional development (CPD) particularly outside of contracted hours.

- There is a need for distributed leadership training within CPD programmes to strengthen multi-level leadership in adult, voluntary and community learning organisations (AVCL).

**Acknowledgments**

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Leadership for Progression: First steps provision and collaborative leadership

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Executive Summary
During the last five years, first steps learning has been a consistent aspect of government policy on adult learning and skills. This research focused on local authorities’ experience of delivering first steps learning and their role in providing potential progression routes into accredited courses and employment. Approaches to leadership, particularly in respect of multi-agency working, were explored throughout the project. The research found that, despite discontinuities between policy, funding and delivery, the three local authorities are delivering First Steps provision that meets the intended policy outcomes, engaging hard to reach learners with low qualifications and enabling progression to other learning programmes. In order to achieve effective first steps learning, local authorities adopted collaborative approaches to leadership working with other FE sector providers and through a wide range of partnerships. This collaborative style of leadership is common in local authority adult learning services, although it often remains covert rather than overt, often with a dependence on individuals rather than embedded within services. The report concludes that in order to deliver a multi-agency and coherent approach to adult learning, there first needs to be a recognition of the role of collaborative leadership. A focus on explicitly developing collaborative leadership as a mechanism for delivering coherent adult learning should be adopted.

Introduction
First Steps learning has been a component of Adult Community Learning (ACL) since 2004. ACL is largely delivered by local authorities and encompasses non-accredited learning across a wide range of curriculum areas, programmes aimed at particular groups such as family learning, and programmes that provide a starting point or “First Steps” to other learning. It is these “First Steps” programmes, which are the focus of this research.

The origins of First Steps learning within local authority ACL are found in the LSC consultation paper (2004), which proposed the categorisation of learning into a number of types including First Steps. From that time local authorities have utilised the terminology ‘First Steps’ to categorise some or all of their provision. In the context of this research, the term “First Steps” is used throughout the text when referring to these types of learning programmes.
Local authority adult learning tends to be characterised by partnership working with a range of organisations, often including other education providers. Although these arrangements could sometimes be described as “collaborative leadership”, they are rarely identified in this formal way and there is little research evidence on leadership in this part of the FE sector.

Progression from First Steps learning is an important element of the Government’s skills strategy, most recently articulated in the DfES White Paper, (2006). First Steps learning should, by definition, lead to other provision. This suggests that multiple rather than single providers need to be involved in providing an appropriate range of progression opportunities. There is little research evidence on the leadership models required to deliver this type of learning.

The primary research issue was to identify what approaches to leadership and planning best support the delivery of First Step learning and progression to other learning. Secondary research questions related to the definitions and guidance on first steps provision and its role in promoting progression to other forms of learning. The research considered how leadership and planning at strategic and operational management levels can best support the delivery of First Steps programmes that meet a wide range of learners’ needs and provide those learners with progression opportunities into other learning.

The research project focused on three local authorities who describe themselves as predominately providers of first steps learning. It encompassed desk research on the policy and funding context for First Steps learning, with particular reference to the government’s intended outcomes for these types of learning, as articulated in its White Papers and strategies. A literature review of current research on First Steps learning, progression and leadership in adult learning in local authorities was undertaken prior to the new research. The primary research was undertaken with managers responsible for the delivery of First Steps learning in three local authorities.

The aims of the research were to:

- Determine what approaches to leadership best supported the delivery of First Steps learning.
- Conduct primary research with three local authorities who provide First Steps learning.
- Utilise previous research on First Steps learning and leadership to provide the context for the research.
- Identify good practice and potential areas for development.
Given the above aims the key lines of enquiry were to:

- Determine and define what First Steps learning encompasses, both from a policy and from a service provider perspective.
- Understand the type of First Steps programmes and delivery mechanisms used by the three local authorities.
- Identify what progression takes place from First Steps learning and how this is planned.
- Identify what leadership and planning approaches were adopted to support the effective delivery of First Steps learning.

**Research Framework**

Successive government White Papers and strategies have consistently identified the need for First Steps learning as part of an overall strategy for ensuring progression in adult learning. The 1997 Kennedy Report highlighted the need to widen participation in learning. However, the origins of First Steps as a descriptor for a type of provision are found in the 2003 White Paper: 21st Century Skills. Following this, the LSC undertook consultation on the implementation of First Steps and other types of adult learning, largely delivered by local authorities. In 2006 the first detailed guidance issued by the LSC distinguished between Personal and Community Development Learning (PCDL) and other types of learning. It defines PCDL as:

“Learning for its own sake; it is not linked to prior levels of achievement and is not intended to link to the LSC’s funding priorities or to offer progression to other learning aims.” (LSC 2006:1)

By contrast, the same document does not present a definition of First Steps provision nor identify a specific budget for it. However, it does offer the following guidance to regional and local LSC offices:

“The distinction between First Steps provision and PCDL, will, on the margins, be open to interpretation, and some differences of approach should be tolerated.” (LSC 2006: 3).

The 2006 FE White Paper, “Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances” recognises that the FE sector is well-placed to provide opportunities for second-chance learning and that this is a precursor to accredited provision.
In 2007, the inaugural policy document from the new Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, “Adult Learning and Skills: Investing in the First Steps”, continued to recognise that:

“There is no one size fits all approach. So we are using the flexibility in the system to develop a better, more personalised offer. Some programmes are qualification-focused and employment orientated. Others are more informal and designed to attract those who are reluctant to engage in learning and provide potential starting point for progression.” (DIUS 2007)

Hayward (2006: 82) suggests that to date adult learning policy has focused primarily on increasing participation rates. Relatively little attention has been directed towards supporting progression, even though this is equally important in terms of meeting policy objectives. One consequence of this policy focus on participation is that adult learning provision is frequently poorly coordinated.

Throughout recent government White Papers and policies there is an on-going recognition of the need to provide first steps into learning to assist adults in achieving skills and qualifications. Within the policies and strategies summarised above there is an underlying assumption that progression is linear.

There is relatively little research evidence on the progression of adult learners either within informal or vocational learning. There is no clear typology of adult learning pathways. The evidence available suggests that adults zigzag across the learning system, progressing horizontally to courses of the same level, sometimes taking courses at a lower level and occasional progressing to courses at higher level, as their interests and needs change (McGivney 2003).

The research evidence suggests a dissonance between policy and practice in relation to progression:

“There appears, therefore, to be a significant mismatch between adult learner’s notions of progress and progression and those of policy makers. The latter emphasises the need of the adult learning system to support linear, structured progression, interpreted as engagement and leading successively more advanced levels. The limited evidence available suggests that learners do not need a learning ladder, but a learning lattice to cope with diverse modes of progression.” (Hayward, 2006:103)

The Foundation Learning Tier is seen as a key mechanism by which a systematic progression framework will be established. This will be introduced in 2009/10 and therefore does not impact on this research.
Leadership and Management

There is little published research on leadership and management in ACL. Nevertheless collaborative leadership is increasingly being acknowledged as playing a key role in successful institutions in the learning and skills sector. Given the likelihood of joint planning for First Steps provision, or at least progression across different institutions, collaborative leadership models appear relevant. A useful definition of collaborative leadership is provided by Jameson (2007: 7):

“Collaborative leadership is a process or method to guide a diverse group of people to find solutions to complex problems that affect them all, and to encourage systems change. Collaborative leadership embraces a process in which people with differing views and perspectives come together, put aside narrow self-interest, and discuss issues openly and supportively in an attempt to solve a larger problem or achieve a broader goal.”

One area of education where distributed leadership approaches are gathering momentum is within the school sector, where the extended school and Every Child Matters agendas are encouraging multi-agency working. A recent report by the National College of School Leadership (Coleman 2006: 50) acknowledges that adopting distributed leadership approaches can be challenging and identifies a number of demands related to distributed leadership:

- The ability to make explicit previously implicit elements of individual roles;
- Greater openness to reciprocity and interdependence;
- A higher tolerance of impermanence;
- Openness to change in different ways of working;
- Tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty;
- Strong negotiation skills.

The experience of distributed leadership within the schools’ sector may be relevant to adult learning.

Research Methods

Discussion with NIACE, a partner in this research project, identified four potential local authorities who delivered First Step learning. Three of these indicated a willingness to take part in the research. The local authorities were contacted by telephone in November for a background discussion regarding the project and agreed to be interviewed further for the project.
In early December lead officers from the local authorities were each interviewed by telephone at pre-arranged times. These were semi-structured interviews: a number of broad questions were sent in advance by email. Interviews took place in December 2007. These focused on gaining an understanding of the services around the following themes:

- Understanding the context of the service: type of local authority, demography, nature of provision, other providers in the area.
- Definitions of ‘First Steps’ used by service providers.
- Exploring how the policy intentions of First Step learning are interpreted and implemented.
- Identifying practical issues of leadership and management in the delivery of First Steps provision.
- Exploring how progression is planned and achieved in association with other providers.

All participants agreed that interviewees could be tape recorded. Full transcripts were not produced but the recordings were used to produce detailed notes to inform the summary case studies. Face to face interviews were conducted in January 2008. The interviews focused on leadership and management issues:

- Leadership of adult community learning within the local authority.
- The source of strategic leadership for adult learning within the area.
- The role of the PCDL partnerships in the area.
- Planning and management of progression.

The three local authorities used for the case studies, although from different regions and using different modes of delivery, were similar in their missions of being primarily ‘First Steps’ providers and identified themselves in this way.

**Local authority A:** a unitary authority of approximately 160,000 population, with a number of areas of significant deprivation. The proportion of the population from BME communities is slightly below the national average, although individual BME groups are significant in a small number of wards. The service directly delivers approximately half of its provision and sub-contracts the remainder to two FE colleges and the Workers Educational Association (WEA).

**Local authority B:** a metropolitan borough of approximately 290,000 population. The borough has areas of significant socio-economic need. The proportion of the population from BME communities is below the UK average, although these are clustered in particular areas, and there is a large traveller community. The Adult Learning Service was created to reach potential learners who were not accessing the FE colleges’ traditional accredited programmes. All provision is delivered directly by the Service using its own staff.
Local authority C: a metropolitan borough with a population of 390,000. The borough has a number of areas of significant deprivation. Its BME population is above the national average. The service commissions all of its delivery and does not employ any of its own tutors. The core contracts for delivery are with small voluntary sector organisations, the WEA and Council departments.

Space does not permit the inclusion of the case studies in full, and therefore the case studies are used as a resource for the “Research Findings” section of this report.

The methodology used to collect the primary evidence was, as indicated above, through telephone and face-to-face interviews with three local authority providers of First Steps learning. Semi-structured interviewing proved an effective method of guiding discussion. The broad areas for discussion were sent in advance to the interviewees, with more detailed questions used during interview guide discussion. As a practitioner researcher, my knowledge of and familiarity with the research topic, whilst providing me with a good understanding of the issues, sometimes led to an on-going dialogue or digression with the interviewees. The interview template ensured that the same areas of discussion were covered with each of the three local authorities’ staff and my practitioner knowledge enabled issues to be explored in depth.

Research Findings

The main findings from this research study are grouped as follows:

- Defining ‘First Steps’ learning.
- Policy to practice: delivering First Steps programmes.
- Leadership: strategic and operational approaches.

Defining ‘First Steps’ learning

From the initial interviews with all three local authorities a key issue was the operational impact of different interpretations of policy on service delivery. Consequently, the subsequent desk research and further interviews investigated this further. There is a clear policy intention from both DfES, and latterly DIUS, to provide progression routes within adult learning, from informal learning to qualification bearing courses. First steps learning is located at the beginning of these progression routes. An early issue that emerged both from the literature and the interviews with service providers was a lack of clarity regarding the definitions of ‘First Steps’ and the associated consequences for funding. All three local authorities were clear about their own definitions of “First Steps” learning. These are summarised below.
Local authority A has a clear service mission to widen participation in learning and to work collaboratively with other organisations to achieve this. Within this context it defines First Steps learning as:

- Targeting adults with low qualifications or from communities that have low participation in learning.
- Providing learning opportunities that are relevant and accessible to the target groups of learners.
- Developing self-esteem and confidence to enable learners to progress to other learning if they wish.
- Linking closely with other providers to provide opportunities for progression.

Although the service identifies all its provision as “First Steps” the local LSC accepts that all its PCDL budget as well as First Steps budget can be utilised to deliver these programmes. Local authority B sees itself as providing pathways into forms of learning that non-traditional learners will find accessible. The main characteristics of the First Steps programmes it delivers are to:

- Work in the most deprived areas to try and engage people back into learning.
- Be responsive and needs-led, with a desire to try and deliver what people want.
- Systematically use outreach staff to engage with residents in identified communities.
- Deliver learning at times when people want it and in venues that are close to where people live.
- Offer a wide curriculum – any subject or activity is offered as long as there are clear learning outcomes.

Local authority C defines First Steps provision as:

- Building and strengthening communities by targeting learning activities at the most disadvantaged communities and learners.
- Providing a range of learning activities for people who have not benefited previously from the education system with a view to engage them in learning.
- Providing learning that is relevant to the personal needs of learners or those of their children or communities.
- Provide small “First steps” with clear progression routes to other learning, characterised by short initial sessions, sometimes single sessions, and short courses.
The service is very clear about its mission to use learning to overcome disadvantage and to assist individuals in obtaining employment, increasing skills or achieving personal development. There is a high degree of consistency between the three authorities on the purpose and characteristics of First Step learning. Common characteristics in all three services were:

- **“First Steps” learning is the starting point for progression to qualifications and potentially, employment.**
- Outreach and engagement by specialised outreach staff and a wide network of community organisations.
- A curriculum that is responsive and flexible to learners’ needs.
- Progression opportunities are planned from the outset.
- A strong emphasis on learning with a clear purpose and outcome.

The operational definitions used by the three services fit closely with the policy expectations outlined in Government’s White Papers, strategy and policy. Therefore the local authorities believed that both their mission and operational approaches were delivering government policy.

**Policy to Practice: Delivering First Steps programmes**

There is no specific guidance given by the LSC for First Steps provision although a specific budget is allocated to local authorities for this purpose. The LSC’s 2006 Policy Requirements for Planning guidance does not define First Steps provision but it does offer the following guidance to regional and local LSC offices:

“The distinction between First Steps provision and PCDL, will, on the margins, be open to interpretation, and some differences of approach should be tolerated.” (LSC 2006: 3)

This lack of clarity about First Steps in the LSC guidance documents has had practical implications for the delivery of these programmes. Each of the three local authorities had received different guidance and interpretation from their local LSC office. One local authority was able to utilise all its PCDL and First Steps budget to deliver a broad “First Steps” programme. By contrast, another local authority has had to re-define the description of its programmes to meet local LSC guidance. Its local LSC requires 24% of provision to be First Steps and 76% to be PCDL. The service classifies its accredited programmes and Family Literacy & Numeracy courses as First Step provision. The third local authority was required by its local LSC to spend 20% of its adult learning budget on First Steps and the remainder on PCDL.
One local authority expressed frustration with changing definitions and terminology used by policy makers and funding bodies:

“We’ve been sucked into terminology that we may not have used - we were asked to map First Steps and other provision. Before that we would have called it community learning - local learning for local people.”

The practical experience of two of the three local authorities is a discontinuity between policy intention and its implementation at local level. All three local authorities have a clear mission to deliver learning to adults with low levels of qualifications, yet local LSC interpretation may be directing significant proportions of funding away from this intention.

**Leadership: Strategic and operational approaches**

Strategic leadership for adult learning within the geographical area of the local authority was an area of enquiry pursued through the research. All three local authorities felt that the strategic leadership of adult learning should be undertaken by the local authority reflecting local authorities’ leadership of wider social and economic agendas within their areas, particularly through Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Area Agreements.

With respect to where adult learning was managed within the council, two local authorities were located within Children & Young People’s Services, and one within Community Services. One local authority particularly felt that the location of adult learning within a directorate whose purpose was learning was important:

“Learning is central to the purpose of the directorate - learning is not a - servant of other agendas.”

There were differing views in respect of where the leadership for adult learning lay. One local authority felt that the demise of the learning partnership funding from the LSC had reduced their capacity to provide this leadership. They thought that the Local Strategic Partnership Board should be leading on adult learning but questioned whether members of the Board had the experience or knowledge to do this effectively.

The other two local authorities believed leadership of adult learning to be central to their service’s mission and therefore had a deliberate strategy of leading local learning partnerships. Both acknowledged that this required the support of senior officers and elected members. It was expressed in this way by one of the local authorities:
“We are not funded to do this. However, the Council sees its role as providing strategic leadership on a number of multi-agency agendas and facilitating partnerships to deliver them. This provides me with the support, but not necessarily the funding, to bring together the main providers of learning and other organisations in the area and to act as a catalyst for creating a coherent approach to adult learning.”

Another local authority outlined the strategic role of the adult learning service as:

- Consciously identify all potential partners in the area, from small voluntary organisations to large FE colleges.
- Systematically identify the role and contribution of all the organisations to adult learning.
- Systematically develop learning networks defined by geographical areas underpinned by the strategic principle of enabling providers and other key agencies to work together.

The leadership styles articulated by all three local authorities have characteristics of a collaborative approach to leadership. None of the local authorities expressed their leadership style in these terms but there are a number of characteristics of their approach to the leadership both of their own service and relationships with other organisations. These included:

- Recognise that achieving a coherent adult learning offer was a complex issue which required organisations to work together.
- Bring together the main providers of adult learning in order to avoid duplication, plan progression and address issues.
- Promote a culture of trust, utilising the experience of a range of different organisations in the public and voluntary sector to develop coherent adult learning provision.

All of the local authorities recognized the challenges and frustrations that this approach sometimes brought. These included the need for organisations to agree to put aside self-interest, commitment to attend meetings and work for a shared goal, ensuring the seniority of staff from partner organisations and difficulties of facilitating effective working between partners of varying size and influence.

The recent requirement of local authorities to convene PCDL partnerships on behalf of the LSC was seen as consistent with the roles previously taken by local authorities in respect of leadership of local learning partnerships. However, two main concerns were expressed by all three local authorities: the limited scope of the partnerships and the validity of the data produced from the curriculum and financial mapping. One local authority expressed it in these terms:
In many ways leading the PCDL partnership builds on the strategic role that we have undertaken through the Learning Partnership over the last few years. But we’re not taking the narrow remit prescribed by the LSC as this will go against all that we have tried to achieve by mapping curriculum and progression routes across all types of adult learning, not just PCDL.”

Clearly collaborative leadership is evident within the local authorities. However, it appears in some cases to be dependent on individuals rather than being overtly and systematically embedded within the services and their partner organisations. This therefore raises questions of sustainability and the need for succession planning when individual staff leave or move to other roles.

**Conclusions**

There are clear policy intentions from the DfES, and latterly DIUS, to provide progression routes within adult learning, from informal learning to qualification bearing courses, and that public funding for learning should be targeted at adults with the lowest qualifications. Despite clear policy intentions, and support from the LSC as the strategic funding and planning body, the interpretation of the LSC guidance by local LSC staff resulted in some local authorities being discouraged from delivering what is the desired policy outcome for both the Government and the LSC.

The classification of adult learning into separate, and relatively small, funding streams may lead to adult learning being defined by its funding rather than its purpose, resulting in a fragmentation of provision for both learners and providers. For example, the separate funding streams currently allocated to local authorities by the LSC include First Steps, PCDL, Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities, Family Literacy Language and Numeracy and Wider Family Learning. Each funding stream has specific guidance and audit requirements.

Progression by learners from First Steps courses to accredited programmes is a clear government policy intention. The three local authorities all planned their programmes to aid learner progression. This included joint planning with other providers. However, across the FE sector as a whole, the fragmentation of funding for adult learning and the competitive tendering processes seem to militate against effective progression.

**Strategic Leadership**

All three local authorities are providing strategic leadership for adult learning within the geographical areas they serve. Given the wide remit of local authorities which extends to the Local Area Agreement blocks of children and young people, safer and stronger communities, older people, health and economic development, there is a strong case for local authorities to lead on linking adult learning with these wider agendas. Two of the local authorities have taken on this strategic leadership role: it is not funded and therefore depends on both the capacity and goodwill of local authorities to take on this role.
The leadership of the PCDL partnerships, recently ascribed to local authorities, is a welcome step in recognizing this strategic leadership role, but the remit of the partnerships is too narrow. By restricting the remit of the Partnerships to non-accredited learning, the opportunities for planning progression between different levels of learning and across a range of providers have been missed.

By extending the remit of the PCDL partnership it would be possible to start addressing issues of planning and progression of adult learning at a local level. The reintroduction of a small level of funding, similar to the learning partnership fund previously provided by the LSC, could be used to enhance the collaborative leadership approach that needs to underpin such partnerships.

**Collaborative Leadership**

There is evidence of collaborative leadership of adult learning by local authorities across their geographical areas and providers. This leadership style is common in local authority adult learning services although it remains covert rather than overt, often with a dependence on individuals rather than embedded within services.

Parallels can be drawn with the multi-agency work in relation to Children and Young People’s Services where the joined up thinking necessary for the Every Child Matters agenda requires schools and partner organisations to develop a collaborative leadership approach. In order to deliver a similar multi-agency approach to create coherent adult learning, there first needs to be a recognition of the role of collaborative leadership in achieving this ambition. A focus on explicitly developing collaborative leadership as a mechanism for delivering coherent adult learning should be adopted.

Despite the discontinuity between policy, funding and delivery, the three local authorities are delivering First Steps provision meeting the intended policy outcomes – engaging hard to reach learners with low qualifications and enabling progression to other learning programmes.
References


Learning & Skills Council (2006) Planning and Funding for the Safeguard – Personal and Community Development Learning (PCDL), Family Programmes and Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities. Coventry: LSC.


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 undertake to investigate and research these key themes.

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