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'Learning to learn about leadership': the Future Leaders Programme

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INTRODUCTION

When was the last time a professional course really changed you? Sure, we all pick up tips at conferences and some workshops can really lead to a change in practice. But when was the last time you felt that a course had really changed *you*?

One course with this potential is the Future Leaders Programme (FLP), run by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education and supported by SCONUL, UCISA (Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association), JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) and the British Library. The FLP is designed to help experienced professional information services staff in Higher Education (typically library and ICT staff) to deepen their understanding, leadership ability and potential in preparation for a role as head of service.

A laudable aim – but can it really lead to change?

Well, I have just completed the year-long 2009/10 course and I feel it has changed me. Let me try to explain ...

APPLICATION

As you might guess from my introduction, the Future Leaders Programme isn't like other librarianship courses I have undertaken.

For a start, you don't just pay your money and turn up. You need to apply for the course. The application includes some of the things you might expect – an up-to-date version of your CV and a reference from your boss – but it also includes some more testing elements. You have to put together a 'statement of purpose' that covers your understanding of 'leadership' and why you want to go on the course. You also need to have a 'project'.

I must admit I don't really like the term 'project', which smacks (to me) of a small pastime developed for the purpose of the course. In reality you had to identify a pretty major activity in which you would be involved over the lifetime of the course and that would stretch you as a leader. For some of my fellow students this activity seemed almost incidental: they developed as leaders almost in spite of their planned project. For me, the project was an integral part of my development. As I reflected in my 'capstone report', 'I believe I wouldn't have developed so far without the programme; I couldn't have developed so effectively without my project.'

My project was rooted in activities undertaken before the course began, and still continues after the programme is now over. My 'project' – sorry, my 'leadership activity' – is concerned with developing the University of Warwick's library academic support division to grow its service, offering to meet the future needs of its user communities, in support of teaching and learning and (most importantly) the university's evolving research ambitions. As part of the application I had to explain what this entails with details of context, drivers and so on.

The other part of the application was a telephone 'interview'. Again, this wasn't your usual interview. I was told within seconds that I had been successful and was on the programme. The real purpose of the interview was to see how I would respond to the nature of the course, with questions about me: not my CV or my public persona – me. Who am I really? How do I feel about things? How do I feel I might change?

As I say, not your typical course.

PREPARATION FOR THE PROGRAMME

Before we began the course, all the members of the cohort were registered on the programme's virtual learning environment (VLE) and given a book review to write. This was partly to get us thinking about leadership, but it was also a tool to encourage teamwork, which was one of the key approaches of the programme: group

activities were to be undertaken in learning triads, action learning sets and other groupings throughout the course. I must admit, I did wonder if the programme would feel 'competitive', with a bunch of would-be leaders in suits trying to outdo each other. I couldn't have been more wrong – 'collegiate' and 'supportive' would be nearer the mark. The book-review exercise was a good start to this approach, with the 'burden' of reading a bookshelf of management tomes shared among 19 people who would then write two-page abstracts to share their knowledge and understanding.

I chose a collection of essays, *The Harvard Business Review on leadership*.ⁱ My most reassuring early discovery was Mintzberg's assertion that

'The manager's job is enormously complicated and difficult. Managers are overburdened with obligations yet cannot easily delegate their tasks. As a result, they are driven to overwork and forced to do many tasks superficially. Brevity, fragmentation, and verbal communication characterize their work.' (p 11)

'All very familiar', I thought, followed by 'Thank God it isn't just me!' Other writers included in this compendium spoke to me about my focus on people, how personal skills are more important than textbook approaches and the importance of what Heifetz and Laurie call 'adaptive challenges' (p.171-197).

The readings got us thinking about our understanding of leadership. More testing, we were also asked to think about our understanding of ourselves. We were sent various questionnaires to complete to obtain our 'team management profile' and undertake a 'window on work values' review, the outcomes of which would be revealed in Module 1.

THE TEACHING MODULES

Over the year we undertook three modules, covering three themes: you, your team and your organisation. These took place in the Møller Centre in Cambridge, with each module covering 3–4 days and including some traditional lecture/workshop elements but mostly focusing on group activities and individual reflection. The three course leaders were augmented with external speakers (such as Anne Jarvis, who had just become University Librarian at Cambridge, and Les Watson, the driving force behind the Saltire Centre at Glasgow Caledonian University) who gave very candid views on what leadership really means. There were – as you would expect – more atypical elements to the FLP formal programme. One such activity involved bringing in an object that has a special significance for you and having to explain its meaning in a leadership context to your action learning set. A very powerful ice-breaker.

Each of the module themes tied in with my project and my leadership journey.

Module 1 focused on developing a greater understanding of self. We were given the results of our team management profile and the 'window on work values' outcomes. Neither revealed any great surprises for me. The team management profile (a review similar to a Myers–Briggs analysis) showed my major role to be as an 'explorer-promoter', with 'creator-innovator' as the first related role and 'assessor-developer' as the second. This fits in with my view that I am more of a 'blue-sky thinker' than a 'detail' person. Likewise the 'window on work values' review confirmed my view that I am more concerned with people (empowerment, individualism and independence) than with processes (compliance, authority and conformity).

What was more interesting was how this was handled by the course leaders. Instead of each of us being left to reflect on our character, we were all lined up in order of our 'scores' on various themes, to explore different spectrums of behaviour. As our group of 19 demonstrated, people who are all obviously able leaders bring quite different skills sets to the role. This also showed that there is no one right way to lead and highlighted areas where we can all develop our skills sets, or at least ensure that we surround ourselves with people more prone to providing complementary skills for our teams. It also reminded me that we should be more tolerant of people who are not like us ... specifically because they *do* complement our roles.

Module 2 covered team relationships, which was especially important for my project as this (by then) involved reconfiguring my division and developing new teams within it. Module 3 looked to the wider context, which again I found useful because my project was influenced partly by external drivers (the research agenda, scholarly communications developments and new opportunities afforded by web 2.0 initiatives) as well as by a new university strategy that gives greater emphasis to developing and promoting research excellence at Warwick.

... AND THE REST

But it would be wrong to portray the programme as merely ten long but enjoyable days spent with new colleagues/friends in sunny Cambridge. The 'real' work of the course invariably took place over the other 355 days of the year. The project was – of course – non-stop, but we were also directed to undertake other on-going developmental activities. These included readings (even the FLP has some traditional elements!), regular (virtual)

contact with supportive triad groups and (physical) meetings with our action learning sets (a group of seven in my case) to explore progress, to question and probe and to give feedback and advice on our projects. We also had to conduct a 360-degree review of our management style (twice – to identify developments over the year), work as a team of 19 on a PESTLE (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legislative and Environmental) analysis of our sector (not easy to do; less easy to co-ordinate) and interview a leader who impresses us. We were also urged to keep a reflective diary. I have always been quite reflective in my practice but writing all this down was a novel and – at times – quite cathartic approach for me.

REFLECTION

So, what *are* my reflections on the programme?

In my application I outlined why I wanted to go on a structured developmental programme for leadership. As for most of us, much of my knowledge of management/leadership has come from experience/observation. However, I am aware of the limitations of this approach. This was brought into focus four years ago when I supplemented my 'self-taught' knowledge of marketing by taking the Chartered Institute of Marketing's professional postgraduate diploma course. I found the CIM course useful for building on theories and for discussing practice with fellow professionals. This led to affirmation for some practices and questioning of many more. It also re-energised me and brought an added depth to my practice.

So did I get a similar experience with the Future Leaders Programme?

Structured programme

Although they did seem like large chunks of time to be away from the office, I found the modules (and their related activities) extremely useful. It was actually good to get substantial periods of time away from the workplace to reflect, become exposed to new ways of thinking and discuss my project and personal issues with fellow leaders. I found the programme provided a good balance between lectures, personal reflection and group activities. The guest speakers were generally of a very high quality and brought additional perspectives. I found the readings variable (one key reading at least still remains a mystery to me!) but generally very useful and – most importantly – thought-provoking. The self- and colleague-assessment exercises (team management profile, 'window on work values', 360-degree leadership practices inventory, etc.) I found especially useful in my quest to enhance my self-knowledge.

Action learning set

I found the action learning set to be an excellent way to explore ideas and concerns in a safe and supportive atmosphere. The team did take a while to 'perform' and really facilitate valuable learning conversations, but our later meetings were especially productive, with much effective inquiry and considerable insightful advocacy. Ours is a group that marries a desire to assist with the expertise and experience to do so and we plan to still keep meeting now that the formal programme is completed.

Triad

I particularly valued the work undertaken with my triad. Although setting up sessions has been (and continues to be) difficult, the regular hour-long telephone meetings have helped me to reflect and put problems into perspective, and to consider the merits of various possible solutions. I also found I got support, reassurance and (on occasions) a much-needed 'virtual hug'. Again, we plan to carry on 'meeting' post-course.

Reflective diary

Although I have undertaken reflective practice for many years, I do not routinely keep a diary and found it difficult to keep a reflective diary – I tended to group learning activities in chunks rather than provide daily observations. Having said that, this proved another useful discipline. It was also invaluable to have a year-long overview to see how I really developed during the lifetime of my project and the course and this provided the basis of my observations for the 'capstone' event at the end of the course.

CONCLUSION

You don't get tested (in the traditional sense) on the FLP. There is no exam, no right answers. It is about stretching and testing yourself. It is, as the course leader put it, about learning to learn about leadership.

At the end of the programme you are expected to put together a 'capstone report' reflecting on your project, your journey. I found this a deeply personal and moving experience. I also found I was more than happy to share my reflections with my action learning set, which showed just what a journey we had taken together. Compiling the report also helped me to pull out themes. It made the elements of the programme click together: at last I really saw how the textbook readings were linked to observations from the leader I interviewed and how this related to my project and myself. For example, concepts like 'defining moments' (sometimes leaders don't have to choose between 'right' and 'wrong' but between 'right' and 'right')ⁱⁱ or 'tough empathy' (telling people what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear)ⁱⁱⁱ came across strongly in my readings, in the reflections of other leaders

and in my own development of practice. The twelve months have given me a greater understanding of what leadership really means, of the paths leaders need to travel and of myself and where I am on this journey.

So what next? For me, one of the most powerful stories in *Deep change*, one of our central texts, is the tale of the hermit cutting wood who knows he needs to sharpen his dull and rusty saw but instead focuses on the immediate need to cut wood, albeit it slowly and ineffectively.^{iv} I think we all recognise that hermit. I have benefited from a structured development programme that has taken me away from the immediate demands of cutting wood. I now need to ensure that I continue to sharpen my saw rather than merely going back to focus on my piles of timber.

For more about the FLP see www.lfhe.ac.uk/support/flp.

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^{iv} Robert E. Quinn, *Deep change: discovering the leader within*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996, pp 59–60