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Research overview: effective leader-led relations

Margaret Collinson and David Collinson

Centre for Excellence in Leadership
Lancaster University Management School
Lancaster LA1 4YX
UK

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Research Overview

Effective Leader-Led Relations

Margaret Collinson and Professor David Collinson

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Contact Details

Centre for Excellence in Leadership
Lancaster Leadership Centre
Lancaster University Management School
Gillow Avenue
Lancaster
LA1 4YX

Professor David Collinson
Project Co-Director and Researcher
Tel: 01524 593147
Email: d.collinson@lancaster.ac.uk

Margaret Collinson
Project Co-Director and Researcher
Email: m.collinson@lancaster.ac.uk

Executive Summary*

This final working paper from the 'effective leader-led relations' project summarises the key findings and recommendations from the research. In particular, it outlines:

- A brief overview of five central research findings: **the vital importance of leadership, high staff motivation, leadership challenges, multiple community engagements** and **blended leadership**.
- **Ten recommendations** that are informed by these research findings. This research project was specifically designed to feed ideas back into the post-16 sector about how to enhance leadership processes.
- An additional case study on **blended leadership**. A primary focus of our research is its examination of staff's perceptions of what constitutes effective leadership in the post-16 sector. This in turn reveals employees' preference for (what we term) 'blended leadership'. This theme is elaborated in the appendix of this paper, where we present a further case of blended leadership in action within the FE sector.

*We are very grateful to all those in the learning and skills sector who have generously provided their time to outline their experience and views on key issues surrounding effective leader-led relations in the post-16 education sector. The researchers would also like to acknowledge the funding of this project by The Department of Education and Skills via The Centre For Excellence in Leadership.

Contents

Background	5
Key Research Findings	8
The Vital Importance of Leadership	8
High Staff Motivation	9
Leadership Challenges	10
Multiple Community Engagements	13
Blended Leadership	14
Key Recommendations	16
Appendix: Blended Leadership and Organizational Turnaround	20
References	25

Background

This final working paper presents a brief summary of some of the key findings from the effective leader-led relations project. Our project has drawn on contemporary critical and post-heroic perspectives on leadership to address the complex dynamics between leaders and led and to locate these in their specific conditions and consequences within the FE sector. Rather than treat leadership as the mysterious, charismatic properties of individual 'heroes', our approach views leadership as a dynamic, interactional and asymmetrical process between 'leaders' and 'followers'. It also recognises the crucial importance of the conditions and consequences of these leader-led relations and practices. Interactions between leaders and followers occur within particular shifting local, national and global contexts and have complex intended and unintended effects (for elaboration see Collinson and Collinson 2005a and b, Collinson 2005a and 2005b, 2006). This theoretical emphasis on (a) the importance of understanding leader-led relations and (b) locating these leadership dynamics and interactions within their specific conditions and consequences has framed the entire project.

Context is especially important for understanding leadership dynamics in FE where colleges typically operate at the very heart of the communities they serve. Their 'embeddedness' within local communities raises significant challenges for post-16 leadership. One example of this is that FE colleges operate at the 'leading edge' of poverty and disadvantage in their local communities. They play a key role in providing a 'second chance' (and even 'a third chance' in some cases) for many students who have previously under-achieved in mainstream education and/or who have experienced barriers to their education as a result of disadvantage, poverty and other domestic problems. Colleges seek to ameliorate disadvantage and one of its associated effects, disengaged and ill-disciplined students. Context is also important in the sense that post-16 organizations operate in a highly complex and turbulent funding environment, an issue explored in more detail below.

Within the UK education sector FE colleges are frequently viewed as the 'poor relations' of the U.K. education system. Respondents have referred to FE colleges as the 'Cinderella sector' of UK education. The Foster review (2005: 38) argued that colleges were being 'hampered by their reputation and profile, compared to schools and universities'. This is also the case in relation to research where, by comparison with schools and universities, FE colleges have received little attention.¹ Against this background, it was vital that our project conducted detailed research within FE colleges and produced sector-specific empirical data.

1. There are of course some exceptions here (e.g. Gleeson and Shain 1999, Gleeson 2001, Lumby 2001, 2003, Briggs 2005, Hodgson et al 2005).

The foregoing theoretical perspective also informs our research methodology. The empirical research has examined leadership processes and their multiple impacts at various organizational levels. Within the 7 post-16 organizations on which the researched has focussed in detail², we have examined (a) how leadership is **exercised, distributed** and **enacted** at multiple hierarchical levels, (b) how leadership is **experienced** at various hierarchical levels and (c) how these numerous levels **interact** with one another in specific practices. The research findings are based on 140 research interviews in these 7 post-16 organizations. In addition, we have conducted four focus groups with students. Our analysis also draws on a detailed examination of college internal documents (and many designed for publicity purposes), as well as the observation of various college practices and dynamics. We have also gleaned extensive additional information by conducting formal feedback 'dissemination sessions' with our case study colleges, presenting our findings at sector-specific workshops and to networks of Principals on their leadership programmes. Presentations on our key research themes at The CEL Annual Conference, other CEL meetings and various academic conferences have provided further data, feedback and contacts.

The research has now published five Extended CEL Research Working Papers. In addition to this Research Overview (8,918 words) we have published: **'Leader-Led Relations in Context'** (6,900 words), **'Leadership Challenges'** (8,022 words), **'Blended Leadership'** (5,750 words) and **'Communities of Leadership in FE'** (13,321 words). These papers focus on the positive dynamics around leadership found in the sector and the significant challenges facing FE colleges and those in leadership positions. In addition, we have written a first draft discussion paper entitled, 'Leadership, Faith and Community Cohesion' (3,700 words) which we are currently discussing with colleagues in CEL. Clearly, these extended working papers are substantial documents, reflecting the rich and detailed empirical data we have collected in the sector. This in turn illustrates the generous access and co-operation afforded by our case study organizations and their staff. Given the length of these papers, we have also produced 'Research Briefings' that provide additional 1,500 word summaries for each of these extended working papers. In total, this project has therefore produced research papers

2. Within several of these organizations we undertook research at various sites and departments located in different parts of the town. This enabled us to recognise the extent to which the multi-site nature of FE colleges can itself constitute a significant leadership challenge. For example, staff working in sites away from the main campus can feel isolated and detached from the college community and culture. This reinforces the need for leaders to ensure that colleges are characterized by a cohesive culture and sense of community. While email and electronic communication can help to overcome some elements of this distance, they are no substitute for face-to-face interaction.

comprising over 50,000 words that seek to provide **sector-specific, theoretically-informed empirical studies of leadership dynamics in post-16 education.**³

The production timing of these working papers is also significant. We have attempted to disseminate preliminary findings to the sector (both in written form and in presentations) as soon as possible and whilst research was still ongoing. The first two papers were written in March 2005, the third in November 2005 and the fourth and fifth in March 2006. Throughout the project, research and dissemination have therefore occurred simultaneously. While most of these working papers were produced much earlier than would traditionally be the case in academic research projects, this ongoing dissemination process has been particularly valuable in creating a constructive conversation and dialogue between researchers and those working in the sector.

Specifically designed to feed ideas back into the sector about how to enhance FE leadership processes, several of these working papers also provide recommendations informed by the research findings. The main themes of these ten recommendations will be summarised in the second half of this document. We begin with a brief overview of five central research findings: **the vital importance of leadership, high staff motivation, leadership challenges, multiple community engagements and blended leadership.** While these overlapping and inter-related themes by no means adequately represent the more detailed empirical analyses available in the working papers, they provide a condensed overview of the project's findings that may be helpful to the sector and to those seeking a very brief summary of this research.

3. The project employed one full-time researcher, Margaret Collinson. In addition, as research co-director David Collinson was seconded to CEL for 20 per cent of his time.

Key Research Findings

WORKING PAPER 1 (LEADER-LED RELATIONS IN CONTEXT)

1. The Vital Importance of Leadership

'How important is leadership in an FE college? On a scale of one to ten, I would put leadership at the highest point, and before anything and everything else. Good leadership makes you the best, bad leadership makes you the worst.' (Middle manager)

'It is crucial. I have worked for five different leaders and I know what a difference a good leader makes.' (Middle manager)

'Within a college environment a good Principal, who is a good leader, is the key ingredient. If you get someone good who can manage everything and enthuse people along the way then the college has a good chance.' (Divisional Manager)

Our research has found that staff working at all levels of the post-16 education sector express a quite clear (and remarkably consistent) view about both the importance and the nature of effective leadership for the day-to-day running of colleges. Respondents have been unanimous in the view that good leadership is crucial to the effective running of colleges. Our findings reveal the widely perceived importance of leadership and the preferred leadership style based on consultation and distribution wherever possible. Relatedly, we have also found a widespread recognition from research respondents that leadership occurs at many different hierarchical levels. It is by no means simply the province of the college Principal, the Head or the senior management team. Rather than romanticising particular leaders, respondents express a consistently strong preference for clarity of direction, consistency of approach and a willingness to take responsibility on the part of all of those in senior positions (these findings are elaborated in Collinson and Collinson 2005a and see also the 'Blended Leadership' section below).

2. High Staff Motivation

'The key is for people to feel that they are contributing and that they are important and valued members of the team. This is why leadership is critical. It is very necessary, especially in this very challenging environment in FE. People should be told and told and told again how well they are doing. Motivation is everything. Praise is essential.' (College Principal)

'Praise and encouragement are vital. They are the best motivators of staff. You must also appear to be acting fairly and explain everything. You cannot just assume people understand what you are trying to do.' (Senior Manager)

'It's very rewarding to see our students develop, going from being very shaky to being very confident. They learn so much here that is not just about qualifications. Education can emancipate people. We are proud of what we do at this college.' (Lecturer)

As the foregoing quotations illustrate, our research has found that praise, recognition and acknowledgement for a job well done are key motivators of staff. Equally, while we had expected to encounter a demoralised workforce, we have repeatedly interviewed employees who are highly committed to their students, their colleges, the sector and the community they serve. Interviewees have consistently talked about the importance of 'making a difference' and of enhancing the learning benefits for students in the UK post-16 education sector. They frequently undertake a remarkable amount of teaching with goodwill and enthusiasm, often willing to give of their 'free time' and going well beyond formal job descriptions and role expectations.

Respondents display high levels of commitment, dedication and professionalism. They frequently articulate a close identification with the goals and objectives of the post-16 sector, expressing pride in their college's contribution to community and economic development. Interviewees express a strong commitment to enhancing the educational achievements of the next generation of students and to providing opportunities for students who are in danger of 'missing the boat' in terms of education. Hence, they believe that post-compulsory education can 'make a real difference' to the lives of their students. Staff are particularly committed to doing what they can to ameliorate the detrimental effects of wider disadvantage and deprivation (These findings are elaborated in Collinson and Collinson 2005a).

WORKING PAPER 2 ('LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES')

3. Leadership Challenges

'Work in the post-16 education sector is frequently driven by performance targets. One of the problems here is that these different targets can be in tension with one another. Leaders and more junior staff alike are under intense pressure to achieve conflicting government targets.....There is also so much time devoted to the data collection that drives the funding. The number of staff needed to service data collection is unbelievable.' (College Principal)

'The Learning and Skills Council are much more performance related but they keep changing the goalposts. We have postcode funding and a ferocious audit regime with no tolerance. We are paid three times a year. If the students are here in November we get the funding. If they are gone in February then we have no funding.' (Senior Manager)

'There are a lot of pressures from outside, a multitude of targets and at times, conflicting targets. There are real pressures to achieve phenomenal targets. Nobody objects to being accountable but this constant changing of the goalposts is very difficult. Funding regimes in FE are highly complex. IF GOVERNMENT WOULD JUST GET OFF OUR BACKS FOR 5 MINUTES!' (Head of School)

Prior to commencing the empirical research, we had assumed that FE Principals (since 'Incorporation') had been empowered to lead and transform their colleges, no longer curtailed by the 'shackles' of LEAs. Yet, our research has found that many respondents in leadership positions feel extremely constrained.⁴ They are accountable to multiple stakeholders and in numerous ways. FE colleges have to address and satisfy the demands of various stakeholders (e.g. The DFES, financial auditors and teaching quality auditors (such as Ofsted, Adult Learning Inspectorate, Quality Assurance Agency), the Learning and Skills Councils (at local, regional and national levels), Regional Development Agencies, training standards, sector skills councils, community organizations, local employers, students, staff and local community leaders etc).

4. Very similar findings are reported in an unpublished doctoral thesis (Woolford 2004) that examined the impact of the first two years of the Learning and Skills Council upon the leadership of ten FE college principals. This project revealed that the balance of power invested in principals at Incorporation has shifted to the LSC. Ironically, for many of these respondents this shift is reminiscent of LEA control. This research also highlighted similar tensions within the LSC structure between national level control and local level autonomy (see also Hodgson et al 2005 and 3.4 below).

While formalised assessment and auditing processes are designed to raise standards and facilitate effective leadership and management by increasing accountability, transparency and responsibility, our research suggests that this intensive 'audit culture' (Strathern 2000) often produces counter-productive effects, the very opposite of those intended. We have found that excessive and inflexible auditing, inspection and financial controls can erode the potential for effective leadership in post-16 organizations. As the number of inspections and auditing processes continue to grow, local autonomy and discretion appear to reduce, while the challenges facing FE leadership increase. The following sub-sections briefly summarise these leadership challenges in more detail:

3.1 Excessive Auditing and Inspection: In recent years the nature and extent of government monitoring of the post-16 sector has intensified. There is now much greater focus on performance targets, audits and inspections. Many respondents at various hierarchical levels express the view that the multiplicity of audits has now reached counter-productive levels. Our research suggests that performance assessment can (over time) generate unanticipated and highly distorted outcomes, particularly when measurement systems and targets are unrealistic and cut across and contradict one another.

3.2 Impact on Staff: Many respondents argue that this emphasis on audit reduces employee morale and increases their mistrust of those in leadership positions. The extensive high levels of staff commitment (point 2 above) have to be set against these ever-increasing audit and assessment pressures within the sector. Our research indicates that staff's energy and enthusiasm is under threat due to increasing workloads and ever changing targets. Employees in the post-16 sector feel constrained by a lack of time and money.

3.3 Inconsistent and Contradictory Funding Mechanisms: Interviewees repeatedly highlight what they see as the excessive monitoring and contradictory funding mechanisms that characterise the post-16 sector. Principals and senior managers assert that the amount of staff needed to provide the very detailed information to satisfy audit requirements of the different bodies is extremely expensive and unsustainable for FE and 6th Form colleges. The frustration of many respondents (at all levels) is increased by the belief that much of the micro data required for numerous different audits and assessments is of little real value.

3.4 LSC Practices: Many respondents express deep frustration about the inconsistent and frequently shifting policies and practices of the LSC which can have significant effects on colleges, particularly on their ability to deliver (funded) courses. Whilst Principals, Heads and other senior managers frequently acknowledge a collaborative relationship with their local and regional LSCs, they view these representatives merely as conduits for national LSC agendas. They consider local LSCs to be largely powerless bodies that simply provide a buffer zone to ensure the implementation of national LSC policy. As agents of an arm of government, local LSC representatives are widely viewed as tightly controlled by the national LSC. Their role is seen as one of pacification. Several senior managers have also expressed a lack of confidence in LSC staff because many are not perceived to have direct previous experience of working in the FE sector.

3.5 Impact on Leadership: The pressure on those in leadership positions to respond to highly demanding (and sometimes unrealistic) targets can at times make it difficult for them to act and lead in consistent ways. FE Principals and other senior managers have claimed that they sometimes feel compelled to adopt a more directive, controlling and detached leadership style, even though this is not their preferred approach. Hence, in certain circumstances, Principals are not able to fully utilize their preferred leadership style. This in turn can erode trust and confidence in leadership further down the hierarchy. The research has found that staff frequently believe that the Principal's leadership style reflects their personality and values. Hence, the relationship between leaders and led can suffer because of the severity of the targets imposed on post-16 organisations.

3.6 Impact on Leadership Succession: Principals and senior managers have a relatively consistent view that this intensified workload constitutes a significant barrier to senior and middle managers applying for senior posts. Many respondents from senior manager to lecturer level emphasise that the job of Principal is highly stressful and in some cases seems almost impossible. One indication of this succession crisis is a reduction in the number of applicants for Principal vacancies.

To summarise, our research has found that auditing, inspection and funding mechanisms are frequently seen as excessive, inflexible and contradictory. This in turn can have corrosive impacts on effective leadership, staff motivation and leadership succession. These arguments are elaborated in more detail in Collinson and Collinson (2005b).

WORKING PAPER 4 ('COMMUNITIES OF LEADERSHIP IN FE')

4. Multiple Community Engagements

'FE is a really good transition from school to work. In here you meet the whole community, everyone from doing degrees to those who are struggling to write their own names because of learning disabilities. This diversity of people and talents in the college mirrors what's out there in the community. The college is a scaled down version of the community. Foster got it right. The role of the general FE college is to develop the skills and abilities of the local community. We make our students more employable so that they have a decent life and get rewarded for their hard work....But the funding mechanisms make us feel like second-class citizens.. My worry is that FE education will disintegrate and only then will they realise what they have lost. ...The government needs to make up its mind. Does it want an FE sector or not?' (College Principal)

'Kids blossom here in the FE sector who otherwise would be lost to the education system. We don't make enough of that. This is very important to the economy. If people come out of FE with good basic skills, they can get a good job. We just don't make enough about our value and payback to the economy. The payback for me is that the kids realise that they are not as thick as they were told they were. They grow as people and as citizens.' (College Principal)

'What colleges can do in the community is enrich people's lives. We are operating in a very deprived area. We have massive potential to improve people's daily lives in the community. There's a lot of potential that we can't unlock at the moment. We have a duty to serve our community and the college is well-placed to do this.' (Divisional Manager)

Working paper four demonstrates that FE leadership is mediated through multiple communities (Collinson and Collinson 2006). This is the case **within** colleges, **between** colleges and their multiple-partners and **between** different colleges. In the FE sector communities and leadership are inextricably-linked, sometimes in mutually-reinforcing, but also in potentially contradictory ways. This paper explores the FE college as: **a learning community, a socially inclusive community, an inclusive learning community and a provider of adult and community learning**. It examines some of the important challenges for those occupying FE leadership positions in seeking to engage with these multiple communities. These findings also indicate the need to re-think our understanding of the nature of (effective) leadership in the FE sector. This may be much more about engaging strategically and skilfully with multiple communities, through collaboration, co-operation and facilitation. Equally, our research suggests that a blended leadership approach may be particularly effective in the FE sector, as the next section elaborates.

WORKING PAPER 3 ('BLENDED LEADERSHIP')

5. Blended Leadership

'The Principal has built a reputation for delegation. He's well known for it. But there is a side to him that is also very firm. That's important too. If he says something is going to happen, it does happen. Somebody now is making decisions. Some decisions he has had to make are not very nice, but at least he made them. He grasped the nettle.' (Middle Manager in the Education department)

'Here we like a firm leadership approach. We like to know what has to be done and needs to be done. We like straight talking and the Principal is a very straight talker. Without strong management and leadership we would not know what we are doing. We also work as a team. We want what is right for students and staff. Honesty is the key thing. We like "rigorous leadership." People like to know where they are. I give my staff a list of all their duties. Once they know what their roles and responsibilities are, they feel comfortable doing their job.' (Course manager)

'When there is a particularly difficult problem that we are struggling with, it is important to know that people in leadership positions are willing to step in to help if we think it is necessary.' (Course manager)

A primary focus of our research is its examination of staff's perceptions of what constitutes effective leadership in the post-16 sector.⁵ This in turn reveals employees' preference for (what we term) 'blended leadership', an approach that combines specific elements of traditional 'top-down', hierarchical leadership with more contemporary aspects of 'distributed' leadership. Many staff in FE view effective leadership as combining distribution with direction, delegation with decisive decision-making. They prefer leadership practices that provide structure and clarity **as well as** team-working, communication and a shared sense of mission, responsibility and accomplishment.

5. The perspectives of followers have been significantly neglected in the literature on leadership (Collinson 2006).

This kind of leadership approach respects and enhances the autonomy and discretion of specific communities whilst also reinforcing the wider culture of the whole college. Within the literature on education and on leadership, hierarchical and distributed models are typically seen as opposing, with the latter frequently valued and the former often criticised as outmoded. We have found that FE employees continue to value important elements of a more directive leadership approach combined with aspects of a more participative style.

Our working paper selects three issues as examples of staff's preferences for 'blended leadership'. We examine employees' preferences for '**both** structure **and** team-work', '**both** distance **and** proximity' and '**both** external **and** internal communities'. Staff prefer leaders in FE who are both detached enough to understand the bigger picture and provide strategic direction, but also close enough to offer tangible and visible help with particular problems and to be involved in day to day issues. They also value leaders who retain a 'blended' and balanced engagement with **both** 'external' **and** 'internal' communities. Our research therefore suggests that employees in post-16 education prefer leaders to eliminate ambiguity wherever possible through the creation of transparent and consistent structures and practices. They also value an informal, flexible and highly communicative culture in which FE leaders are approachable, available and 'down to earth' and where notions of team-working are a lived reality (see Collinson and Collinson (2005c) and appendix to this paper).

On the basis of these key research findings, the next section of this working paper outlines our recommendations for improving leadership within the post-16 sector. These recommendations emerge out of the analysis presented within the specific working papers that constitute the 'Effective Leader-Led Relations' research project.

Key Recommendations

1. Review The Nature of Leadership in the Post-16 Sector

Our research indicates the value of re-thinking the nature of (effective) leadership in post-compulsory education. An important conclusion is the need to move away from the rather simplistic and dualistic categories of 'heroic' versus 'post-heroic' or 'romanticised' versus 'distributed' leadership (Collinson 2005a). Based particularly on employees' views of what they consider effective leadership, our findings suggest that a 'blended leadership' approach may be particularly effective in the FE sector. Many staff in FE view effective leadership as combining distribution with direction, delegation with decisive decision-making. This kind of leadership approach can respect and enhance the autonomy and discretion of specific communities whilst also reinforcing the wider culture of the whole college. In the colleges we have researched delegation blended with direction appears to be central to effective FE leadership. More research is needed to elaborate this idea and to develop the skills of blended leadership (see also appendix of this paper).

Our paper on the importance of 'communities of leadership' indicates that FE leadership may be much more about collaboration, co-operation and facilitation, about brokering and co-ordination, enhancing interdependence and developing reciprocity within and between communities. This much broader view of FE leadership emphasises the importance of engaging strategically and skilfully with multiple communities. It focuses on leaders as facilitators of continuous improvement, on their ability to act with others, share power and responsibility through 'moral purpose' and by creating 'a community of learners'.

There needs to be much greater appreciation that the conditions, processes and consequences of leadership dynamics are frequently highly ambiguous. Leaders in post-16 education are often confronted by paradoxical situations that are not of their choosing. The idea of blended leadership presupposes that ambiguity and paradox are inescapable features of leadership and that more nuanced (and less dualistic) skills and ways of thinking may be a precondition for effective leadership and management. More research is needed on the simultaneities and multiplicities faced by those in leadership positions within the sector and on the strategies they deploy to manage and resolve these ambiguities and contradictions. Blended leadership can be seen as one (relatively effective) way used by some in leadership positions to manage these ambiguities. There may well be others.

2. Review the Mechanisms of Funding, Auditing and Inspection

Our research raises questions about the extent to which current excessive and contradictory performance assessment practices produce unintended and distorting effects. It appears that the intensive audit culture is eroding the potential for creative leadership within the sector. Alternative evaluation processes and funding mechanisms that are better able to recognise and encourage good practice should be explored. We need to know more about how alternative assessment processes might facilitate positive partnerships and reward blended and community leadership.

Funding mechanisms can help to sustain a more stable environment in which colleges can operate. Current funding practices, however, such as unexpected clawbacks, short-termism and inconsistency, produce a highly turbulent context that undermines consistency and long-term planning. This has particular implications for areas that are especially vulnerable to budget cuts like adult and community learning and extending access policies.

3. Review The Role of the LSC

Our research suggests that the roles and leadership of the LSC in relation to FE are in need of urgent review. In some areas the current role of the LSC appears to be eroding the potential for effective leadership within the sector. Further research more specifically on the role of the LSCs and their relationship to the post-16 sector may well be helpful here.

4. Review Leadership Succession

Given the increasing remit and responsibilities at Principal and Head level, establishing a systematic approach to career succession planning is of crucial importance to assist the sector in identifying prospective leaders and senior managers. A preliminary recommendation of the research is that any leadership succession planning should be designed in ways that can actively identify and encourage talented staff at head of department/division level and not just concentrate on those in senior management teams.

The research has identified extremely able staff, particularly at the level of head of department/divisional manager, who demonstrate the ability to manage a variety of tasks in a competent and enthusiastic manner. They also appear to be contributing new ideas and creating systems that assist the smooth running of their departments. These employees demonstrate, through example, the importance of remaining student-focussed whilst managing the increased administration tasks. It should be possible to ensure that 'fast-track' career progression is achieved through the effective integration of leadership development and certification. We would recommend that any training and evaluation systems for succession planning should ensure that future FE leaders retain a strong student focus in their policy and practice.

A further related finding here is that Principals and Heads of School who have had experience of working at different institutions during their career appear to bring a wider knowledge, experience and perspective to the job of Principal. This illustrates the importance of developing career structures that encourage potential Principals to gain from the experiential benefits of geographical mobility as a valuable step for achieving promotion to the position of Principal. It is also recommended that any new career succession programmes will need to be developed through the involvement of the professional staff within the sector.

5. Enhance Leadership Development

Leadership development programmes could focus on the principles of blended leadership (e.g. highlighting the value of **both** delegating **and** directing, of balancing **both** external **and** internal communities and managing **both** distance **and** proximity.) A key element of blended leadership is the importance of enhancing communication (a) between leaders and led and (b) with and between staff at all levels across the organisation.

Our research highlights the potential benefits of developing more effective FE-based blended strategies for community engagement. CEL teaching programmes could give greater emphasis to the development of blended and community-based leadership skills. CEL research could explore more specifically the kind of skills that are required for effective community engagement. The research findings also suggest that specific programmes designed to develop community leadership (and social entrepreneurship) could be extremely helpful. This might include the sharing of current best practice, the identification and development of specific skills, experience and knowledge about community-based leadership strategies and about working with community groups.

6. Develop the Strategic Role of FE in Engaging Communities

Many of the staff we have interviewed argue that important aspects of colleges' role in the community remain invisible or undervalued, particularly by those who evaluate performance and decide on funding. They feel that their contribution is not recognised. Greater appreciation of colleges' extensive community role is particularly important given the current government's concern to encourage the FE sector to contribute to its 'skills agenda' for a better skilled and competitive workforce by developing a more coherent 14-19 agenda, widening participation and improving basic adult skills. It would be useful for research to explore how positive partnerships with local communities could be enhanced.

7. Improve Pay

This has been repeatedly mentioned as an important issue both by teaching and administration staff. We have found cases in some local labour markets where pay (in FE) is no longer competitive with other areas of education. Here the recruitment and retention of staff can present significant leadership problems for FE colleges. In order to support local leadership within the sector, it is important to address disparities in pay and working conditions (e.g. teaching hours and holidays) between FE college staff and those in schools and in 6th Form Centres.

8. Improve the Working Environment

Policy makers need to address the under-investment in building stock within the sector. Many respondents at various levels have highlighted the importance of the quality of the working environment. Examples of small but effective changes have been provided. Staff who have experienced even slight improvements in their environment repeatedly point to the uplifting effect on morale and motivation.

9. Build Bridges Between Colleges

Despite the pressure for colleges to compete with one another (and with sixth forms), our research has found several cases of effective collaboration between colleges and particularly between Principals. We have discovered examples of relatively informal communities of Principals (typically in proximate colleges) meeting to share experience, good practice and strategic vision. These Principals have emphasised to us the value of such professional community networks. As Foster (2005) also argued, there is a great potential here for such communities between colleges to be encouraged and extended.

10. Build Communities Between Leadership Colleges

It could also be helpful for CEL to strengthen its links and networks with other leadership colleges, particularly those recently established within the UK education sector, such as the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. This building of communities across different organizations directly concerned with various areas of education and leadership could facilitate the sharing of good practice and new ideas about leadership processes. The NCSL, for example, has already developed a 'leadership community strategy' that seeks to build communities across four areas: (1) within organizations, (2) between organizations, (3) between schools and communities and (4) in a multi-agency context.

Appendix:

BLENDED LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL TURNAROUND

The following case study focuses on our key research finding of blended leadership. It presents further data that have emerged since the original paper was published. This case adds to the original analysis in at least three ways. First, it suggests that blended leadership may be particularly effective in the context of organizational **renewal, turnaround** and **culture change**. Second, it indicates that blended leadership could be especially useful in the context of **larger** colleges. Third, the case reveals that blended leadership can **empower** employees in various hierarchical positions.

One of our case study colleges is one of the largest of its kind in the field of FE, higher and community education attracting over 23,000 student enrolments per year. Since he was appointed four years ago, the Principal has initiated a major culture-change. His predecessor had been very dictatorial, as one longstanding lecturer explained,

The previous Principal was very autocratic and did not delegate anything. The college just lurched from one crisis to another. We were always fire-fighting.'

Because of the way that budgets were previously organised, faculties and departments often believed that they were competing with one another, thus significantly weakening the potential for collaboration across the college. When the new Principal took over, the college was losing £2.25 million each year. According to him, *'Student retention was terrible and achievement was worse.'* The college is now financially stable, student retention and achievement are very high and results compare very favourably with colleges around the country.

The new Principal explains this turnaround as a result of a major culture change. He has established what he calls *'a culture of delegation'*, providing departments with budgetary control and distributing leadership down the organization. For example, the college has just created a new School of Art and the Principal has delegated budgetary responsibility to the college *'I told them "It's your budget. You're responsible so go ahead and make it work." I like to devolve power and responsibility.'*⁶

6. This is part of a new £30 million building programme (50% LSC funding, 50% bank loans), initiated by the Principal to upgrade the rather tired college buildings.

Yet, he also blends this distributed approach with a willingness to address difficult financial issues (requiring redundancies), with an insistence on decisive decision-making and on the need to provide staff with clear direction and structure.⁷ The Principal explained,

This is a very large FE college. In fact, we've got faculties here that are bigger than some colleges so delegation is essential. It provides tremendous benefits. I'm not running all over the place. I trust people to do their job. I expect them to do it. Of course there are negatives. People at times step beyond their responsibility and sometimes they make mistakes, but it's important to support them when they do. We've got to help them to learn. In a college you've got to have people who can take chances, take risks. That's the sort of person we want to nurture here. The key principle is that if you produce an initiative you get the credit. The worst situation, and the one I definitely do not want, is where the Principal gets all the credit for everything that's done in the college. I stay well away from that. If they get the credit then they will stay motivated.⁸

21

This emphasis on delegation reflects and reinforces a much more transparent style of leadership, based on 'a culture of openness', communication, praise and trust, which the Principal encouraged by 'Being open. If you say you'll do something you do it.' Emphasising the importance of communication, the Principal organises regular meetings with all 65 managers in the college.

Quite remarkably, he also organises annual meetings (accompanied by the Vice Principal) with **all** staff in the whole college (in groups of ten). These face-to-face meetings with the Principal have significantly enhanced communication and community cohesion across the college, as he explained,

7. Paradoxically, despite being autocratic the previous Principal was also reputed to be unwilling to make decisions. One member of staff observed, 'The previous Principal was autocratic but did not make decisions! It was the worst of all worlds. Either no decision was made at all or, if they were made, they did not make sense. This Principal gives direction by making decisions. He'll say "This is where we're going. Now, how are we going to get there?"'

8. The Principal argued that, once delegation has begun, it is vitally important that a 'blame culture' does not develop, because this can undermine the delegation of responsibility.

*'It took an age to do all these staff meetings, but it is **very** beneficial. I live and breath this college and the FE sector but a lot of staff don't and they don't know what is going on. Management often assumes that everyone knows what they know and that they know what is going on. Of course from where I sit, this is not a hierarchical organization. But when you talk to staff you get reminded that, from the bottom up, this place still looks very hierarchical!⁹ So in our small staff meetings we get a lot said that was unsaid in bigger meetings. It takes a lot of guts for someone on the ground floor to come and complain about changes. At the meetings I tell them "I want to know what you're thinking." It is very helpful. Sometimes perceptions can be wrong and we can improve understanding. Yes, they learn some stuff but I think I get more from it than they do. To be liked is not important for this job. They've got to feel they can approach you. You've got to be approachable. It really worries me when people are hiding information and not communicating with us. I say "Come on, why did you not say that?" I get really disappointed when people feel they can't say what they think is important.'*

In research interviews across the college, staff at various levels confirmed that communication has improved enormously since the new Principal initiated this change programme. As part of this new culture, the Principal informs all colleagues that anyone can ask to see him at any time, as he explained,

'The management now know that any member of staff can come and see me and that is a discipline on them. So now, if you are in management, you know there will be feedback on your performance. Communication channels are open. I also go and see every member of staff towards the end of the year. We also meet with students as do the governors.'

By creating much greater clarity in college structures, the Principal facilitated a strong sense of community, based on a shared direction, employee confidence in senior managers and a perception of equity and fairness for staff.

Colleagues confirm that the new Principal's open and transparent approach, combining delegation and direction, has been very effective. They suggest that this kind of approach is particularly empowering and helps them to develop their own leadership skills, as one divisional manager commented,

9. Principals in other colleges have made very similar comments.

'His open style has allowed me to become more of a leader. What this has also taught me is delegation. That's really important. We are now treated as the management team. Previously we were not valued in that way at all. Communication has improved vastly and at all levels. We get to hear what's going on. It's more open now... but it's also tougher...we're much more accountable. There's various inspections and procedures we have to go through. We have to look at whether courses are viable. We have to look at them with different eyes. To give you one example, the Principal has just given me a target to bring in £35,000 by introducing short courses and one day events.'

This senior manager then explained how she seeks to maintain a sense of community with her staff in a similar way, by combining formal structures and informality,

'I have never had problems getting people to do things here. That's because I know what I want and I adopt an informal approach but provide plenty of structure. I try to mix formality and informality. You need that mix because situations vary so much. It's important to acknowledge the job the staff are doing and let them know it's appreciated. I'm lucky here, the team is very strong and very enthusiastic and all are keen to raise standards. Having the right people is the secret and having a strong team with all different strengths. You've also got to know who you can delegate to. Everyone in the team knows their roles.'

One lecturer also confirmed the positive impact of the Principal's more open leadership style on the sense of shared responsibility across the college,

'He has created a delegating culture and this has given an immediate sense of stability across the college. He's got a sharp eye. His finger is on the pulse and he's well connected. This is exactly what you need to be a good Principal. He also has a strong moral conscience and is very approachable. He's always happy to go out for lunch but he does not have favourites. That's very important is that.'

This respondent also emphasised the Principal's decisive and consistent leadership and his willingness to make decisions.

In his emphasis on communication and delegation, the Principal was particularly supportive of female colleagues (the college SMT has always been heavily male-dominated). He explained how he is always keen to appoint women,

'By the time I retire my SMT will be female-dominated. I now have a superb Vice Principal who is unbelievable. I hope we can keep her till I retire in two years.'

Similarly, the predominantly female-dominated workforce in health and beauty are situated in the same faculty as the male-dominated engineers. While historically, the woman divisional manager has felt subordinated by her male engineering counterparts, this is no longer the case, as she explained,

'In the past my skills were not always valued. What we did was seen as superficial by the men. In meetings with the engineers we would propose changes and they always say, "No, you can't do it. The lads won't do it". I like change. But with the men, there's no excitement. They are stuck in their ways. But it's different now. This is not the Principal's way. He values what we do here. He even has an office on this site now!'

The new culture has empowered the women to take a much more proactive role within faculty meetings. These findings indicate that blended leadership may also have an impact on traditional gendered divisions within the workplace: an emergent theme that requires further research.

To summarise, this case study suggests that blended leadership, combining delegation and direction, might be especially useful in organizational renewal and turnaround. It may be particularly effective in large colleges, where the maintenance of a sense of community can be especially challenging. Blended leadership also points to the close relationship between delegation and community. Respondents confirm that they have experienced a sense of empowerment from a leadership approach combining delegation and direction. They also argued that this kind of (blended) leadership reflects and reinforces a strong sense of community cohesion within FE colleges.

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Further Contacts and Information

This Working Paper Series is part of the dissemination of a research project we are currently undertaking, to investigate a critical area that is frequently neglected: the relationship between leaders and followers in the post-16 sector. A Central concern of the research is to locate leadership in its FE/post-16 context and to highlight the key 'leadership challenges' faced by the staff in the sector. The findings draw on research interviews conducted at all levels from Principals to students. An important assumption informing the project is that leadership is a shared process, shaping practices across various organizational levels.

The research is designed to explore important issues such as the extent to which leadership is distributed throughout the organisation; the impact on staff in dealing with the on-going changes within the sector; and the importance of positive feedback from leaders. Our research has also thrown up significant questions about the role of the Learning and Skills Council in managing the sector, the contradictions inherent within the funding regimes for colleges and the tensions between funding regimes and the Government's policy of extending access.

There are also another three published Working Papers in this series which will give you an insight to our initial findings:

1. Leader-led Relations in Context

This paper highlights the importance of context for issues of leadership and also

- a. identifies the preferred leadership style within the sector
- b. the key motivators for staff, and
- c. highlights the commitment and professionalism of staff within the sector.

2. Leadership Challenges

This paper identifies the significant pressures that have to be absorbed by staff at all levels of the colleges. This paper concludes with a series of recommendations to Government designed to assist colleges when facing these challenges.

3. 'Blended Leadership: Employee Perspectives on Effective Leadership in the UK FE Sector',

This paper focuses on what constitutes effective leadership from the perspective of FE staff. Blended Leadership is an approach that combines specific elements of traditional hierarchical leadership with more contemporary aspects of distributed leadership. This research has found that FE staff prefer leadership practices that provide structure, clarity and organisation as well as team-working, communication and a shared sense of mission, and accomplishment. Within the FE sector, this form of 'blended leadership' is routinely accomplished in the context of multiple, conflicting and contradictory demands.

4. Communities of Leadership in FE.

This paper highlights the significance of multiple communities as crucial conditions, processes and consequences of FE Leadership. It suggests that FE colleges make important, but frequently under-estimated contributions to the local community and economy. This is the case within colleges, between colleges and their multiple-partners and between different colleges. The paper explores the FE college as: a learning community, a socially inclusive community, an inclusive learning community and a provider of adult and community learning. It examines some of the important challenges for those occupying FE leadership positions in seeking to engage with these multiple communities.

The research has been sponsored by the Department of Education and Skills (DfES), to whom we will be reporting the final results of the project in March 2006. In the meantime we would be very pleased to receive any comments or suggestions in relation to the initial findings or any aspect you think is relevant to the research. All responses will be treated in the **strictest confidence**. In line with research policy (as demonstrated in the working papers), no institution or individuals will be named in the final report. If you wish to participate, please contact:

Professor David Collinson
Co-Director and Researcher
Centre for Excellence in Leadership
Lancaster Leadership Centre
Lancaster University Management School,
Lancaster, LA1 4YX
Email: d.collinson@lancaster.ac.uk

If you would like to receive additional copies of any of the Working Papers, please contact:

Maureen Morrison
Research Support Officer
Telephone: 01524 510733
Email: m.morrison@lancaster.ac.uk

Further information is also available at:

<http://www.centreforexcellence.org.uk>
<http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/leadership/cel/>

Further information

Research Support Officer
Centre for Excellence in Leadership
Lancaster Leadership Centre
Lancaster University
Gillow Avenue
Lancaster
LA1 4YX
Tel: 01524 510733
Fax: 01524 510757
Email: researchsupportofficer@lancaster.ac.uk
Web: www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/leadership/cel



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