

Chapter 2: The Power of Words

Much has been written about leadership in various contexts; business and educational. But learning about theories of leadership alone is insufficient to lead an effective team. Understanding and improving our practice as leaders is what really counts. In this chapter, I review a selection of leadership literature as background reading, which would further inform the focus, the perspectives and the context of this dissertation.

The nature and quality of leadership (and management) in post-16 FE colleges makes a central contribution to the quality of education and eventually to the achievement of its students. (COBC, 2003)

Leadership exists at all levels within any organisation and FE providers are no different. The literature I review should inform the focus, the perspectives and context of team leadership in further education. After all, it is their effectiveness in leading their team that is crucial to raising the standard and quality of teaching and learning.

Research into the development of leadership in post-16 FE learning is not new, (Lumby 1997a, 1997b, Simkins and Lumby 2002) but attention to the contribution of leadership to improving learner outcomes and FE college effectiveness has grown in recent years (Horsfall 2001). The Common Inspection Framework (CIF) for inspecting individual post-16 education (ALI/OFTSTED, 2001), introduced in April 2001 to fulfil the evaluation requirements of the Learning and Skills Act 2000, has provided a major impetus. It placed leadership at the heart of statutory judgements about providers' standards and quality of provision by asking 'How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?' as one of the seven key questions guiding the inspection process.

Inspections carried out using CIF during 2001/02 revealed that leadership and management in almost a quarter of colleges was deemed to be less than satisfactory (ALI 2002; OFSTED 2003). It is not surprising then, to find leadership and management development at the heart of *Success for All*, the government's reform strategy for further education (DfES, 2002).

Effective leadership and team leader's roles

What does it take to be an effective team leader? Is it by having the right principles, values and power?

Many theories exist as to what constitutes effective leadership and what qualities or characteristics an effective leader should possess. Day et al, (2001), argue that effective leadership is defined and driven by individual values, vision, and integrity. They identify personal qualities and professional competencies common to effective leaders. At team leader level, effective leadership in FE is a matter of exercising a balance between people skills, interpersonal skills and communication skills (Horsfall, 2001). I call these the 'connection skills'. From personal experience, team effectiveness is the ability of the team leader to meet the needs of the team members and bring out the best in individual members, to motivate them so that they can deliver to their best ability. In other words, being able to connect to the team members. The ability of the team leader to create, maintain and develop an effective team is, in my view, one of the key ingredients to successful student outcomes. As a

team leader, I see one of my main roles as supporting my team as they prepare to improve and enhance student learning outcome.

Possessing the 'right' personal qualities of individual values, vision and integrity is not sufficient to be an effective team leader. In my view, the team leader must also hold some expertise in the teaching and learning methodologies of the subject area. Such expertise is the ability to focus on teaching and on learning, coupled with strategies that allow teachers in the team to improve their practice, which supports real improvement in terms of raising student achievements. My leadership role in this sense is curriculum driven. Sawbridge (2000) describes this approach to leadership as drawing upon the concept of instructional leadership whereby the leader seeks changes to teaching and learning processes conducive to improving student outcomes.

Our understanding of the student-related factors that affect student retention and achievement has improved significantly over the last few years. Colleges, and indeed course teams, now have a number of tried and tested strategies to implement (Martinez, 1997, 2000; Martinez and Munday, 1998). However, the adoption, extension and embedding of these strategies very much depends on the leadership skills of many people working at all levels within colleges (Horsfall, 2001). There is clearly a link between leadership and the raising of student achievement (Mortimer, Sammons et, al, 1988, Horsfall, 2001). Leadership is a variable affecting student achievement in FE.

Team leaders are asked to qualify for endless roles: to manage educational innovation - to be at the forefront of curriculum changes in their programme area; to keep abreast of new educational development. Team leaders are asked to manage human resources - to carry out performance reviews of team members. Team leaders, in most colleges are also expected to teach and deliver in the classroom. Team leaders perform many more roles. Horsfall (2001, p3) concurs the job descriptions of team leaders are

"... often crowded and include administrative matters of the moment that tempt or require the team leader to focus on them at the expense of issues to do with teaching and learning."

I could not agree more.

When I began my MA study in September 2000, I recall reading Horsfall (2001) citing Hooper and Potter (1997) on leadership competencies. Horsfall identified seven leadership competencies that effective leaders possess.

1. Leaders need to *set the* direction for the organisation, which incorporates a vision of the future.
2. Effective leaders are influential examples and role models because they are aware that people are more influenced by what they see than by what they are told.
3. Leaders are effective communicators both in communicating the vision, and also inspiring their people in such a way that it causes an emotional effect.
4. Provided that the leader is convincing, followers will want to be part of the operation and work towards the common goal themselves. This process is one of alignment

5. Effective leaders bring out the best in people. This involves a holistic approach which embraces motivation, empowerment, coaching and encouragement.
6. Leaders need to be proactive in a situation of continual change. In effect, they become change agents.
7. Leaders need to have the ability to make decisions in times of crisis and ambiguity.

Reflecting on my three years team leadership experience, I can relate to the majority of the seven competencies. In Chapter 4: The Data, The Evidence, I document examples and evidence of when I displayed, in part or otherwise, most of the competencies above. But competency No.5 particularly stands out when evidenced against Reflective Journal of 18th July 2003. Nita has been teaching part-time for one year and will be teaching full-time from September 2003. But she still needs plenty of support and coaching to overcome her low confidence. She needs constant reassurance and encouragement that she will do well in the classroom and that she will be able to cope with the teaching workload of a full-time teacher. Moreover, she needs to be reassured that it is healthy to have these concerns and that the team will be supportive of her.

Hooper and Potter (1997) argue that the seven competencies are the skills required to lead effectively at all levels, in the appropriate style, in order to add value to the organisation. Whilst in most leadership position this may be true, as a team leader, and from personal experience, I found that I do not always *set the direction* for the team. I am not always the 'purveyor of decisions'. Collective team effort and

reflective team reviews during team meetings are often the instigators of vision for the future. Collectively, these competencies enable leaders to make significant improvement to the performance of the organisations.

As a team leader, personally and through team working, I am often involved in:

- *Directing and developing the work of the team* by means of team aims, objectives and shared ideas about the centrality of the learner the quality of teaching and learning and the standards.
- *Improving teaching and learning* by setting and meeting student retention, achievement and progression targets. By quality assurance and self-assessment in which the starting points are assessments of teaching and learning and the information derived from obtaining students views. These twin inputs result in course reviews that are conducted rigorously and lead to improved outcomes for the students and for meeting raised targets. The reviews connect with and inform the college self-assessment and quality assurance procedures.
- *Using information to improve student outcomes* gaining access to the College Management Information and using that information to select strategies that will inform and improve the student's experience and raise student outcomes about enrolment, attendance and retention.
- *Addressing 'themes' or 'key topics of the moment'* including course organisation and teaching equality of opportunity, widening participation in association with the Bath & North East Somerset communities, retention and achievement.

The evidence of my involvement for the above activities are derived from:

- Regular team meetings that mostly focus on teaching and learning. As a team we share good practice and review the progress of our ICT courses rather than being diverted to administrative issues.
- Policies for the production of schemes of work, lesson plans, assessment schedules and recording of assessment.
- Assessment of the quality of teaching and learning informed by lesson observation by me as the team leader and sometimes through peer observation as a team activity. Three times annually we carry out course reviews as a team. Student opinions and feedback are carried out twice yearly.
- Course Development Plan identifies responsibilities, milestones, completion and review dates.
- Teamwork that is based on effective communication that suits the composition of our vocational setting. As a team, I believe we have shared commitment to high standards and to improvement.

I am sure, I am not alone in feeling that the above activities sometimes create a feeling of holding responsibility without commensurate authority, but at least it avoids distracting me from the essential role of securing high quality teaching and learning. As a team leader, I see one of my roles as keeping non-teaching administrative duties out of team members' way if it can be avoided. I see my role as creating, maintaining and providing learning support for team members so that they can assist students in achieving their potential in the classroom. When I do delegate, I try my utmost to delegate properly, by not setting the member up to fail.

Foremost I am a teacher with teaching and learning as my first priority. But as a team leader, I find that, on a day-to-day basis, I cannot avoid 'matters of the moment' in terms of staff management and course administration. It is here that much of the tension in my job as a team leader is to be found – dealing with but not being overwhelmed by immediate matters so that time continues to be found for teaching and learning. For effective team leadership, it is essential to ensure that activities for improving student achievement is not displaced by administration or by daily diversions.

I can go on and on about the notion about effective leaders and would probably find more literature in this context. But I feel it is apt to finish this 'effective leadership' section by citing Jackie Delong¹ whose thesis on educational leadership has inspired much of my dissertation. In her PHD thesis, Delong² quoting Day et al, (2000) outlined characteristics of effective leaders.

- High expectations of self and others
- Tangible, communicated sense of professionalism
- Central focus on care and achievement of pupils
- Ability to create and maintain learning culture for staff and students
- Toughness of vision, clarity of values
- Created, maintained and monitored relationships
- Entrepreneurial, risk takers, net workers
- Made tough decisions
- Acknowledged failure but learned from it

¹ located at www.bath.ac.uk/~edsajw//delong.shtml

- Possessed Leadership repertoire
- Recognised and managed ongoing tension and dilemmas in a principled way

Bearing in mind that leadership exists at all levels within an organisation, the above characteristics are very much embraced by team leaders and I for one can wholeheartedly relate to the majority of them.

‘Disaffected and disinterested’ stakeholders - the vocational FE assets

Vocational education is important to me and I am passionate about it. I believe many learners who have chosen college over sixth form schooling have a more positive attitude to learning than when they left school. Crequer (2002) found that nine out of ten school leavers with a negative attitude, who continued their studies at FE colleges, believed they were now more confident in their ability to learn. The students who took part in Crequer’s research were low ability learners with low motivation, low self-esteem and low confidence. After their studies at FE colleges, they were found to have greater enthusiasm for their subject. However, it can be argued that the increase in their motivation and self-esteem is in part due to increase in maturity on the part of the learner.

It is common knowledge that a large number of students who choose further education at colleges are low ability learners with low motivation and low self-esteem. (Crequer, 2002) Most of the time these learners also carry a great deal of personal baggage. As a team leader, I know I am in a position to influence what happens to these students by working with and supporting the tutors and lecturers

² located at www.bath.ac.uk/~edsajw//delong.shtml

who are directly responsible for their educational welfare. For most of the time, the tutors and lecturers would be team members. It is therefore important to me, as a team leader to be clearly focused on providing a leadership approach that will facilitate and support teaching and learning that are conducive to the type of students described above. For this I need to have a good understanding of teaching and learning strategies for the team to adopt. The uses of student-centred teaching and learning approaches and individual tutoring where students feel supported, valued and respected as individuals are typical strategy examples.

I firmly believe the vocational programmes at colleges of FE give these learners a second chance – another opportunity to improve their education and move forward in life. I believe the educational environment present at FE colleges and the respect the students get from FE lecturers and tutors play a vital role in any ‘success story’ of previously schooled disaffected students (see Appendix B). I feel it is a privilege to teach these students. This is what drives my working life – being able to make a difference to them.

Continuing Professional Development to the rescue

It is my belief that improvement in student achievement is the main objective of team leaders and most leaders strive to achieve this outcome. Staff motivation is a key element in strategies to improve achievement. According to Martinez (2000), the main strategies to motivate staff appear to be a balanced combination of effective team development; information and awareness raising; efforts to reduce

bureaucracy; a shared approach to the management of change and Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

Do I have the knowledge, skills, experience and understanding of teaching and learning strategies to support my team? I certainly did not when I was appointed team leader three years ago. By engaging in Continuing Professional Development Armstrong (1995) claims that leaders would be better equipped to improve their performance and hence motivate and support their team to be more effective and successful. Through CPD involving leadership training and through the studies of my MA, I have been afforded the knowledge, skills and experience to record teaching and learning observations of my team members and grade their delivery in terms of student learning experience accordingly.

From personal experience, I can categorize the journey through my MA programme as engaging in Continuing Professional Development in a holistic fashion, embracing several aspects of educational management. But, in terms of professional development and support needs, leaders across the FE sector regard professional development as low priority (Frearson, 2003). The author perceived that in general, leaders prioritise few areas in which they felt professional development could help them improve their performance or deal more effectively with current leadership issues. Interestingly, it is not surprising that Frearson (2003) found that 'Dealing with conflict' is the main area which middle managers [team leaders] felt they needed more professional development and support. The author also acknowledges

that within FE colleges, little is known about how leadership practices, development and qualifications have changed over time. Could be my next project!

Leadership in educational settings is a crowded and busy terrain both in terms of policy texts that seeks to redefine the leadership roles and tasks in schools and [colleges] (DfEE, 1998). In addition, there is a growing amount of literature that tends to be concerned with presenting and testing models of effective transformational leadership functions and behaviour (Gunter, 2001). But Further Education (FE), compared to Higher Education (HE), is not a research culture and I perceive my research as a rare opportunity to bring to the forefront, issues that affect team leadership in specific FE related context.

The intensive and unceasing flow of advice and tips, how to lead and what qualities an effective leader should possess, does indicate something of importance of this practice. But leadership of today has evolved and moved away from the somewhat aggressive approaches of yesteryears of 'old-school bullying tactics'. Leadership of today is constrained more rigidly by social justice laws, which, rightly aim to protect employees in terms of ethnic and racial discrimination, gender inequalities and health and safety through risk management strategies. In my professional and personal experience as a team leader, an acute awareness of the rules and regulations involving these legal issues is vital and compliance with them is a necessity for effective leadership.

