



The nature of leadership

Explicating Leadership

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Research Summaries Notices

Research Summaries

The documents in this series are a summary of academic working papers or 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. A copy of the full working paper is available upon request.

Further information about the research programme and other papers in this series can also be found at the following websites:

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

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Centre for Excellence in Leadership

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Introduction: the research project

This research summary provides a brief overview of the 'Explicating Leadership: Leadership Skills and Learning Cultures' research project. This CEL funded research project was set up to study the everyday realities of educational leadership in the learning and skills sector by providing detailed descriptions of what leadership looks like in practice. This working paper provides an introduction to the research project and an overview of some of the emerging themes and findings.

Leadership skills and learning cultures

Our aim in 'explicating' (describing in detail) leadership through observing leadership in action is to raise questions about the character of leadership in the post-compulsory education sector. We are also interested in 'technologies of leadership' - the use of information and communications technologies to support leadership work.

How do you 'explicate' leadership?

This project is concerned with understanding the nature of leadership within the learning and skills sector. Typically such an inquiry begins with basic questions such as how should we define leadership? What is the difference between leadership and management? What counts as effective leadership? Can effective leadership be learned, or are some people just born with qualities that make them better at leading and inspiring others? Our research takes a slightly different perspective. Instead of thinking about leadership as a set of mysterious personal qualities that some individuals just seem to possess, we are interested in understanding leadership as a form of everyday work. Work that is done, not just by college principals and senior managers, but by people, systems and technologies working together across organizations and institutions. By seeking to 'explicate' leadership we are trying to understand, document and unpack all of the ordinary and often taken-for-granted work that goes into accomplishing sets of tasks that are framed as 'effective' leadership. To explicate, therefore, means to describe in detail what we observe when we as researchers spend a prolonged period of time shadowing principals, senior and middle managers, administrative and teaching staff as they go about their everyday work. In doing research of this kind we seek to provide familiar and accessible accounts of leadership-in-action. Accounts that focus on the taken-for-granted and the ordinary aspects of doing leadership as well as the highly visible and often esoteric qualities that so often feature in popular leadership textbooks and theories.

What are our findings?

There are a number of messages about leadership in the sector that have emerged from our work so far. One strand of our research has emphasised the growing importance of technology (technologies - including management information systems (MIS), email, and other forms of information and communications technology (ICT)) in leadership work. Another strand points to the continuing importance of everyday, ordinary, or mundane aspects of leadership - such as meetings and talk as leadership work. Another major finding concerns the importance of the 'audit culture' on everyday leadership (and other) work within colleges. More recent emerging themes concern 'learning leadership' and the experience of leadership development programmes. This also includes a more considered analysis of some of the everyday skills, or 'organizational acumen', that is acquired and used by educational leaders in the course of their everyday work. Such skills involve storytelling, calculation work, planning and strategy, and the importance of delegation, listening and silence in the accomplishment of certain kinds of distributed leadership work.

1. The value of storytelling in everyday leadership

A central theme in our research has been the role of storytelling in the doing of everyday leadership work. Leaders tell stories to followers, and followers tell stories to and about leaders. Such stories provide a means of communicating ideas, sharing knowledge, venting frustrations and dealing with conflict. In a sector in which experiential learning is more common than formal training and development, the documenting and analysis of storytelling is one visible means to engage with and better understand the real world challenges facing educational leaders from across the learning and skills sector.

"When I first came to [this college] I was actually intimidated. Before I even got inside I had to push through a gang of students stood smoking near the main entrance, y'know, literally push my way through. I'm being honest here, I felt intimidated, and I remember thinking, if I feel intimidated and I'm the principal then how are other visitors to the college going to feel?"

2. The consequences of an 'audit' culture in further education

A consistent theme in our interviews and discussions with research participants has been the pervasiveness of the audit and systems of accountability in the working life of those in the post-compulsory sector and particularly in further education. We have come across so many instances of accountability, the need to perform audits of oneself and others, and the need to generate increasing amounts of supporting evidence and data, that we devote an entire part of our research to understanding some of consequences of working within an 'audit culture'.

Principal A: "...part of the problem is the buck stops with the principal, y'know, and at the end of the day, we are entirely accountable for the decisions, and all sorts of members of the management team can make decisions and can influence things but, in any case, you have to have a kind of faith in each other.

Related to the need to account and perform audits is the need to generate credible evidence. For educational leaders this requires an increasing reliance on forms of management information (MIS) and information and communications technology (ICT). However, the production and use of such evidence via MIS and ICT systems is not merely a matter of gathering data that is 'out there'. The production of convincing evidence requires a particular kind of skill or 'organizational acumen' to produce the 'right' figures, to tell the 'right' story, to present to the 'right' audience.

"Fieldnote extract: *Principal asks VPs to come into his office to review this evening's presentation on screen. VP1 corrects the grammar and spelling and questions the content, based on the earlier version she had printed out and annotated. Much humour between the three of them when the Principal loses the formatting, and when VP1's suggested amendments result in her assuming a bigger role in the actual presentation. VPs leave Principal to do the final tweaks, sort out slide transitions, and copy to Memory Stick for transportation to the briefing."*

3. Educational leadership as collaborative work

Through our study of the everyday practice of leadership we have found that the traditional notion of leadership as 'leading from the front' is rarely as important to educational leaders in the learning and skills sector as gaining the trust of organizational members and, in a sense, gaining the permission of followers to be lead. In other words, leadership in this sector is less about the work of a few talented individuals and more about the successful organization of a complex network of distributed leadership practices involving staff from across the organization. This understanding of distributed leadership also requires one to study leadership as a set of ordinary or 'mundane' practices. This doesn't mean, however, that leadership is somehow dull or boring. Quite the opposite, we are suggesting that there is much more to understand about actually doing leadership than is currently included in most theoretical and prescriptive approaches to the subject.

Another example of ordinary leadership work we have observed in our ethnographic studies is the importance of arranging and attending meetings. Indeed, meetings form the majority of the observable work carried out by senior leaders in the learning and skills sector - particularly the work of FE college principals.

Fieldwork extract: *Looking for forms of words and motivating ideas - how best to present this. Meeting begins, discussing a recent presentation by the HR Director . re: collaboration etc.. Says they need to put their stamp on it, tone down some of the phrasing etc*

R: "What we want is high quality provision across the curriculum for our students"

B: "I like the language there .. its direct... I think there's another one which I want for the college about sustainability. At the moment we're living hand to mouth from year to year, which is quite demoralizing for staff. so how do we say that then? .. give me some words.."

.. agree other actions to move things forward .. think of strategies for moderating the language used

R: "Are you OK for the staff briefing tomorrow?"

4. Some implications for leadership development and training

As part of its remit for leadership development in the FE sector, CEL delivers a range of leadership programmes for middle and senior managers. Participants on these programmes work with a number of existing leadership theories, as well as issues from their own colleges and personal experiences. To assist participants in grounding generic leadership models in practices and behaviours relevant to their own situations, the Explicating Leadership team have begun a process of mapping research data from our fieldwork on to some of the models used. The aim is that such mapping exercises can be used as a flexible and sector specific resource by the CEL programmes and their participants.

List of Research Summaries

A central theme in our research has been the role of storytelling in daily leadership work. Leaders tell stories to followers, and followers tell stories to and about leaders. Such stories communicate ideas, share knowledge, vent frustrations and deal with conflict. In a sector where learning from experience is more common than formal training, the documenting and analysis of storytelling is an important way for us to better understand the daily challenges facing educational leaders. We therefore decided to present the initial findings from our research in the format of short stories. Listed below are the other titles in this series:

Short Stories of Leadership from the FE Sector

- 1 Explicating Leadership
- 2 Storytelling and Leadership
- 3 Leadership as Mundane Work
- 4 Technologies of Leadership
- 5 Meetings and Leadership
- 6 Leadership and Emotional Labour
- 7 Bureaucracy and Leadership
- 8 Leadership and Audit Cultures
- 9 Patterns of Leadership
- 10 Game Playing and Leadership Development
- 11 Understanding the Success and Failure of Leadership
- 12 The Language of Leadership

If you have found this short paper interesting, please have a look at the longer version, or other papers on our project website:

<http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/computing/research/cseg/projects/explicating>

Further information and contact details

This project is investigating the nature of leadership and the everyday challenges of leading. Our project focuses on what it is that educational leaders really do, and document in detail the everyday practices of leadership in the learning and skills sector. Our understanding of the practical accomplishment of leadership is achieved through shadowing and studying educational leaders from various institutions over long periods. The research central to revealing the nature of leadership, relations between leaders and the led, risk-taking and entrepreneurship. Our research began in November 2003 and a significant amount of fieldwork has been carried out in colleges from different geographical areas. Four colleges were chosen for more detailed long-term study.

Our findings show that leadership in the learning and skills sector is less about the work of a few talented individuals and more about the successful organization of a complex network of distributed leadership practices involving staff from across the organization. Our research clearly shows that leadership is neither mystical nor heroic, but consists of relentless attention to relatively mundane tasks and much of leadership is management. Leadership depends on doing the 'grunt work' before any form of vision kicks in. In turn, improving the experience and culture of a college comes through attention to everyday mundane details. Our research evidence also shows the importance of technology (including management information systems and email) in their work, for example, in providing new ways of presenting data about colleges. The importance of the 'audit culture' on everyday leadership work is also evident in our research. This raises issues of how a concentration on external audits can lead to a neglect of more broad educational matters. We will be reporting the final results of the research to the DfES in March 2006. In the meantime we would be very pleased to receive any comments or suggestions in relation to these initial findings or any aspect you think is relevant to the research. All responses will be treated in the strictest confidence.

If you would like more information about the 'Explicating Leadership' research project please contact:

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