



The nature of leadership

# Storytelling and Leadership

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# Research Summaries Notices

## **Research Summaries**

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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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# Introduction

This research summary asks whether leadership stories can be used as a resource for the challenges of leadership in the UK learning and skills sector. Drawing upon a series of ethnographic studies of leadership in further education, we analyse the different ways in which everyday practices become 'stories'. We reflect on the extent to which the documenting and analysis of storytelling practices may provide 'teachable moments' through which to inform programmes of leadership development and create links between leadership training, research and everyday practice.

*Imagine the [leadership] styles, then, as the array of clubs in a golf pro's bag. Over the course of a game, the pro picks and chooses clubs based on the demands of the shot. Sometimes he has to ponder his selection, but usually it is automatic. The pro senses the challenge ahead, swiftly pulls out the right tool, and elegantly puts it to work. That's how high-impact leaders operate too. (Goleman, 2000: 80)*

This quote is taken from Daniel Goleman's influential work on leadership styles and emotional intelligence. Goleman puts forward six leadership styles that capture the essential 'tools' of leadership. He provides a series of short stories that seeks to capture something of what it is like to be a leader. The story quoted above is designed to impart an inspiring image of the leader as a golf pro able to select instinctively from an array of tools which can be elegantly put to work. Such images are certainly attractive, which is perhaps why Goleman's work in particular informs many programmes of leadership development, but how useful are such stories for the training and developing leaders in the UK post-compulsory sector? Is doing leadership in this sector like playing golf?

In this paper we use the telling of stories as a way of revealing the diversity and complexity of everyday leadership practices. We present several examples of storytelling as part of our ethnographic research of everyday leadership in the UK learning and skills sector. We focus not only on the content of such stories, but also on the occasions in which particular stories are told.

We begin by examining data taken from interviews carried out with further education (FE) college principals. Often such accounts take the form of 'war stories' (Orr, 1996) or 'sagas' (Clarke, 1972) which have a clear purpose, structure and moral lesson learned. They provide a rich insight into how practitioners see their role, as well as how the phenomenon of leadership is conceptualised. These stories offer a rich rhetorical landscape designed to be heard by a specific audience. We compare these 'invited stories' with others we have collected during our fieldwork. These kinds of story can be analysed for their content but also the way in which such stories are 'occasioned' - how and when certain stories and storytelling practices are used to get other work done. The summary concludes by reflecting on the extent to which our research on stories and storytelling in FE can inform and enrich the design of programmes for leadership development within the sector.

# Telling stories about Leadership

*My previous college was very, very heavily influenced by one man. He had a vision for [the college] and he dragged it kicking and screaming into a new era. It really did need a root and branch look at it. It was in very poor condition, and he did that, it was his vision, his drive, and being a very charismatic leader, and so on, he did all that. But, I mean, a personal view is, I think, he's a bit of Winston Churchill character, y'know, and of course you venerate him and so on, but he's not a particularly good leader in the peace, I don't think. Because I don't think he knows how to deal with that, I think constantly he's, he's looking for change rather than consolidation, and I think sometimes the college just lost its way a bit on systems and written down procedures and so on. It took its eye of the ball.*

*Principal, Sixth Form College*

*Yeah, there was blood on the carpet in the old days, but I think that it's quite a comfort having such explicit values. It's like having Ten Commandments that you and the students can work within, and I really think that that creates a mutual respect. I mean, I teach history so I know something about political systems and I think that this system really does work. That's why it's true what [the principal] was just saying, we really don't need a lot of rules here because we have such explicit values. It's now a well-oiled machine.*

*Lecturer, Tertiary FE College*

*[The principal] came with a very, very clear vision and with a very great emphasis on the importance of culture and people and bringing people along with you rather than imposing systems and so on, and he's had a huge impact on this place, and the place has improved enormously over four years, it's just beyond recognition. It's now nearly three times as big as it was then. I think you'd understand it better in financial turnover, I think it was £3.8 million, was our financial turnover in 2000. Now its £11 million ... He was seen as the 'inspirational leader', y'know, at staff meetings, he'd give speeches and so on, and went into the community and made loads of friends – huge impact – but distanced himself a little bit from what was going on inside, on purpose, as a plan.*

*Senior Manager, Tertiary FE College*

During the first few months of our research we spent time interviewing college principals to get a feel for some of the issues that might prove interesting for our more detailed ethnographic studies. Typical stories we encountered told of the history of the college and of the individual. A kind of 'how things came to be' story. All three stories taken from three different colleges have a remarkable similarity in the language and structure employed to tell the story of the college. The first two explicitly employ epic sounding phrases such as 'era' and 'the old days' to describe the period before a great change. All three employ militaristic and aggressive terms, images of the organizations as machine, the value of strong vision and so forth.

The use of such language is perhaps symptomatic of FE's recent history and represent what Julian Orr has called 'war stories' (Orr, 1996); what Burton Clarke (1972) has called 'organizational sagas'. In FE the saga of incorporation is one that appears throughout our fieldwork data and has become something of a touchstone for the current state of the sector and relationships with governing bodies and funding councils. But what do such sagas tell us about leadership? Each of the three managers above certainly draws explicitly on the language of leadership to tell the history of their college. Each one attributes changes in their college to the work of a single heroic (and in this case male) charismatic leader, but none of them have provided us with convincing evidence for this casual relationship. Are there other elements of these stories missing in the production of the story as a saga?

# Stories of everyday Leadership work - Telling Leadership stories

The following extract from our fieldnotes comes from a meeting of the principal and his senior management team:

*... a useful pre-meeting. For a set-piece meeting like this [with the Learning and Skills Council], it's important to be prepared. I feel I know where we are now and we all know what to say. We did this with Ofsted and got grade 1 for leadership and management.  
Principal, Sixth Form College*

Here leadership and management are treated as a performance, a 'story', that requires organization and preparation. An important factor in the successful accomplishment of leadership and management is that it must be seen to be done. As this extract from a diary study of a newly appointed middle manager suggests, the work involved in the performance of the leadership 'story' takes careful preparation at all levels of the organization:

*Ofsted inspected the college in December 2001 and another inspection is not due until 2005. However, in order to prepare for this inspection we are having a practice inspection. Of course, nobody is adequately prepared and anxiety has set in. We know what is expected but staff continue to indulge in 'arguing with the ref', inspectors are not going to change their views on the importance of lesson plans or schemes of work, and management efforts to help staff prepare are construed as yet more burdens indiscriminately and unnecessarily placed on already frighteningly overburdened lecturers.  
Head of Department, Tertiary FE College.*

For us such accounts represent a very different kind of story from the ones with which began this paper. These stories are not organizational sagas. They do not attempt to provide an understandable history of the college. Instead, these stories tell us something about the work that goes into the performance of good leadership; what classic sociological studies of everyday life have referred to as the 'backstage' work in managing performances (Goffman, 1959). Perhaps storytelling plays a much more important role in the work of FE college senior managers than merely the telling of organizational sagas to interested researchers. Instead, storytelling may itself be a skill that is used by managers to get other kinds of work done. What is interesting is to investigate the work that the telling of stories accomplishes:

*...you play the game, you see, y'know, ... You see, theoretically what happens is you should put all the figures in and out the end pops what level of support you need. But the reality is you never bloody win, we were told actually if we try to get a thirty-five percent grant that we would never get it, so what we did was we made the figures show that we could just do it on thirty-five, but it is a very tough squeeze. We first of all asked for fifty percent...*

*Principal, Sixth Form College*

This extract followed a lengthy meeting between the college senior management team and representatives from the local and national Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Such meetings require a sophisticated understanding of the agency of stories, and in particular how certain stories suit a particular audience (Iszatt White, et al 2004).

# Teachable moments and leadership development

In this final section we discuss how our own approach to the analysis of stories and storytelling can be used to create a space for a dialogue rooted in the actual work that is done in FE colleges. Much of the work of leadership in an FE college consists of such mundane practices as holding and attending meetings, working with figures, preparing for inspections and so forth. While such accounts may not have the inspirational qualities of mainstream leadership development texts, the re-telling of such stories can have a role in programmes of leadership development. As Erickson says:

*The important thing here is not the conclusion that is drawn, but rather that people have engaged, drawn into discussion of ideas about which – before the story – they would have had nothing to say. This is a good metric for stories. I judge the “goodness” of a story by telling it to other people, and seeing how much they nod or laugh as they listen. (Erickson, 1996: 3)*

We have used our research-based stories to generate a dialogue in leadership development programmes currently provided by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership at Lancaster University. In workshops we have presented our collected stories of everyday leadership work. They were received with sympathetic nods, smiles of recognition and laughter. Most of all the sharing of these stories prompted members of the group to share their own experiences:

*Researcher: “I mean how much time do you lot spend playing with figures, for example?”*

*Participant A: “A lot.”*

*Participant B: “...a huge amount...”*

*Participant C: “...yeah...”*

*Participant D: “...too much...”*

*Researcher: “And when you say, I mean, why do you say ‘too much’?”*

*Participant D: “...because it can take up so much of the day when there’s, there’s other things which are piling up, and some of the things are unnecessary if you look. For example there [points at slide on screen], you create a situation and then you’ll find that it’s wanted in a different way, so you have to do it again, but you continually re-work some of the data to get it into the format which could have been asked for in that format in the first place. Too often you’ll ask for something and then they’ll ask for it in a different way because it doesn’t meet the criteria which the next party up was trying to present...”*

The sharing of 'stories of leadership' provides trainers and practitioners alike with invaluable tools for promoting effective leadership development in the learning and skills sector. Sharing such stories with you here in our research summaries is one way of capturing examples of real world practices that can serve as 'teachable moments'. That is, moments that capture real work as it is done in the sector, but which usually would not be documented and passed on to others. In an interdisciplinary environment like CEL that includes researchers, course designers, trainers, and sector practitioners, we feel that stories like these provide a common ground for further dialogue. Unlike structured interviews, surveys, or questionnaires, the gathering of 'ethnographic' data including semi-structured interviews, but also observations, the collection of field notes and diary studies, can provide rich descriptions of practice which may challenge the traditional status of leadership, but in doing so reveals a more complex world of work that practitioners in the sector must manage, but for which few have been formally trained to cope with (Loots and Ross, 2004). The sharing of such stories, we suggest, provides one method of critically examining the nature of leadership in practice by reflecting on the skills and work that practitioners engage in during their everyday life, rather than idealised, or prescriptive visions of what that work should be.

Loots, C. and Ross, J. (2004) 'From academic leader to chief executive: altered images?' *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 28(1): 19-34

# Selected bibliography and further reading

Atkinson, K., Iszatt-White, M., Kelly S., Rouncefield, P. and Rouncefield, M. (forthcoming) 'Playing the leadership game'. Paper to be presented at the *British Educational Research Association Annual Conference 2005*, University of Glamorgan, Pontypridd, 14th-17th September.

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Iszatt White, M., Kelly, S., Randall, D. and Rouncefield, M. (2004) 'Meetings and the Accomplishment of Educational Leadership'. Proceedings of the *2004 Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management (CCEAM) Conference on Educational Leadership in Pluralistic Societies*, Hong Kong and Shanghai, 24-26th October 2004.

Kelly, S., Iszatt White, M. and Rouncefield, M. (2005) ; 'Storytelling and Design: the problem of leadership'. Proceedings of *Rethinking Leadership: New Directions in the Learning and Skills Sector*, CEL Research Conference, 27th - 29th June 2005, Lancaster University, UK.

Orr, J. E. (1996). *Talking About Machines: an ethnography of a modern job*. ILR Press, Ithaca, NY; London.

# 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 is 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 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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