



The nature of leadership

# Leadership & Emotional Labour

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# Research Summaries Notices

## **Research Summaries**

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# The Role of Leadership in Making Staff Feel Valued

The notion of 'feeling valued' (White and Mackenzie-Davey, 2003) aims to capture an individualized, positive, emotional response to the praise or recognition of others – in this case, those viewed as organisational leaders. It can incorporate various emotions (pleasure, embarrassment, satisfaction, pride) and observable behaviours, making it a difficult construct to measure or study empirically. There are two important points to note. Firstly, there is a difference between knowing that oneself or one's work is valued and feeling so. Secondly, feeling valued is an essentially relative concept. How valued we feel will depend upon our opinion of the significant 'other', our view of our own 'deservings', the salience to us of what is being valued, and so on. This research summary uses data from focus groups with college staff to draw attention to the valuing practices of leaders – the day-to-day actions and words through which they seek to demonstrate the value they ascribe to the work of their staff.

# Valuing Practices as Leadership Work

Much of the work of leadership involves communication of one form or another: holding staff briefings, drafting strategy documents, meeting with senior managers, and being held accountable by governors, to name but a few examples. 'Valuing practices' – that is, behaviours intended to express value for or show appreciation of the work of staff – are embedded in the day-to-day work of leadership, as a component of other interactions and activities. It is inevitable, therefore, that evidence of such practices will tend to consist of numerous little snippets – the odd word here, a smile or gesture there – rather than larger 'set pieces'. None-the-less, abundant examples of valuing practices emerge from the data to show that principals devote considerable time and effort to this aspect of their work.

Valuing practices take a variety of forms. From attending a staff retirement party, through giving detailed, quality feedback on a teaching observation report, to saying 'good morning' to staff while walking down the corridor, the principals observed consciously undertook a number of activities designed to make public their appreciation of work done or to present 'the human face' of leadership to their staff. A key aspect of valuing staff is about spending time with them, being accessible to them, and recognising their interests as people rather than merely seeing them as resources to fulfil tasks:

**Fieldwork extract:** *Philip (Principal) leaves his office to go 'walkabout' round the college. A recent staff survey said senior management were too distant. Trying to address this by being seen about the college regularly. Says hello to a member of staff in the corridor, and comments on England's performance at cricket over the weekend: knows the member of staff is a keen fan. Goes out to the main gate to talk to security staff. There was trouble at the college bus stop the previous evening and wants to check the staff are ok. Then goes to the staff room for a cup of coffee and a chat with whoever's there: making himself visible to anyone who wants to talk to him.'*

Constructive criticism can be as much a valuing practice as praise and recognition for a job well done. As the following extract shows, people who want to develop and progress want to hear about their weaknesses as well as their strengths, and be given practical advice about how to move forward.

**Fieldwork extract:** 'Helen (Curriculum Manager) has recently been unsuccessful in gaining promotion to the position of Director for Widening Participation, and has asked Steven (Principal) for feedback as to why she was not selected. Steven wants to make sure the meeting is positive and developmental, as he doesn't want her to feel undervalued and leave her current job. He talks Helen through the grade sheet completed by those who assessed her application against pre-set criteria for the role, giving equal weight to the strengths and weaknesses she demonstrated: e.g. clear depth of knowledge in her own area, but didn't demonstrate thinking or ability in the wider areas she would need to step up to if she got the job. Steven encourages Helen to draw her own conclusions about where she needs to develop in order to be more successful next time (Helen: "So it's about the leadership, not the management." Steven: "Yes, that's right.") and suggests training opportunities and project work which might help her gain the skills and experience she needs. Conversation is honest and open, gives clear reasons for the decision made without being apologetic or patronizing, and focuses on the practical steps required for future development. Helen looks happier as the meeting progresses and talks more confidently about what she intends to do going forward.'

The preceding extracts all relate to one-to-one encounters, and this seems to be an important feature of valuing practices by college principals. The following extract shows a principal turning a group occasion into a series of one-to-ones by 'picking off' individuals in conversation rather than making a speech to the whole group:

**Fieldwork extract:** 'A-level results day. Large numbers of teachers and support staff have turned up, during their holidays, to enable students to collect their results from the college. A huge amount of organisation has gone into ensuring a smooth process, including photographs and interviews with successful students for next year's prospectus, and counselling and advice for those who have done less well. Steven (Principal) does the rounds of staff, sitting with them individually and talking about the results for their department, commenting on particular successes and obstacles overcome. Also talks with support staff, asks them how they are coping with the large number of students arriving for their results, and thanking them for their support in making the day run smoothly. Has an individual word for everyone. Discretely ticks people off his list when he has spoken to them – wants to get round everyone in the course of the morning. Notes someone who is absent - has missed the last two results day despite committing to attend - will get a written warning this time.'

The preceding extracts are presented from the perspective of those undertaking the valuing practices, but it is in the nature of such behaviours that the effect they produce in recipients may not always be the same as those intended by the perpetrators. Evidence from focus groups held with college staff suggests that those on the receiving end feel valued by 'the personal touch': they want to be known as individuals and valued individually for what they do.

*'... And the way I would feel valued is being asked, particularly, how what I do feeds into the way the college is going. Erm, what is it that I need to do to move the college forward to the next ... whatever the next stage is for us.'* (Jane – Teacher)

A developmental, rather than critical approach is also seen as valuing: it is implicit in being given development opportunities that you are seen as having the capacity to improve and this, in itself, is felt to be valuing:

*'I mean, encouraging you, like, any professional development is a way of, you know, giving you a pat on the back anyway, because it's saying you already do really well, but you know, you will be even better if you have the opportunity to develop in this way. So anything that comes up, if you're encouraged to do that, that's really positive.'* (Aimee – Admissions Registrar)

Staff can also feel valued by a recognition of the difficulties of their job, or their personal commitment in dealing with them, irrespective of the outcomes achieved. In the data gathered for this study, it was more often the absence of this recognition than its presence which was felt, with consequent negative effects on motivation and commitment.

*'Now I worked – this sounds real sour grapes – but I worked really hard to hand over, and I handed over spick, span and perfect – and this is a team I built up, I started it, it's the biggest one in the college – and it's such a little thing, but on my last day nobody, nobody, not one person said thank you. ... All it needed was just somebody to say, "thanks, we know it was hard" ... and nobody. So I just ... (shrugs).'* (Julie – Teacher)

A related issue is that of being consulted (or not) in respect of issues which concern them. The failure to consult – which, as with recognition of difficulties, was felt to be notable by its absence – was seen as undervaluing both their professional expertise and their feelings as people. One department was told that its workroom was to be moved and that a system of hot-desking was to be introduced. This was perceived as undervaluing, both in terms of failure to consult their professional judgement on issues of feasibility and, perhaps more seriously, in terms of the stress and uncertainty generated by the announcement of the decision being made without the accompanying practical issues being addressed.

*'And we just sat there – people are nervous already, but that just gets the fear – and when we tried to say, "that's going to be a problem because you've got people in Health and Social Care, we've got so much paper" ... but we couldn't get him (the vice-principal) to see, and I think he just thought we were being silly. Which, of course, just made the whole thing worse, because we want to work together as a team but we can see all kinds of problems – but it was just "this is going to be done, you are just being silly people for having concerns about being able to do your job" and people felt very angry about that.'*  
(Jane – Teacher)

# Trust in an 'Audit Culture'

Implicit in many of the quoted examples of what makes staff feel valued is the desire to be trusted as a competent professional, being consulted on issues related to one's job, having delegated responsibility for one's area of expertise, or sometimes just being left to get on with it, without the feeling of being 'checked up on'

*'I think part of being valued is this trusting again, that you're given responsibility to do a job and they trust you to do that job and know when you're limited, you can say, "hang on, I need help here, I need advice" and they trust you enough to do that. I feel valued when I'm trusted.'* (Jean – support staff)

This desire to be trusted, as a basic component of feeling valued, appears to be at odds with the environment of 'audit culture' (Strathern, 2000) now prevalent in the learning and skills sector. Driven by a post-incorporation need to demonstrate competence, compliance and effectiveness, the growth of monitoring and evaluating practices has included external inspection, funding and governance mechanisms, and the service culture expectations of users and stakeholders. For staff – and particularly teaching staff - the cumulative effect of all these mechanisms is a feeling of being constantly checked up on: an undermining of basic trust in their ability and commitment as teaching professionals. At college level, these characteristics of the system are felt very personally, with the principal and the senior management team cast in the role of villain:

*'... And you're immediately thinking, he's checking up, he's not interacting, and I think that's quite hard for (the Principal) to undo. Erm, I mean, a little example last year, I had a member of staff who was off a lot, so I'd gone into my class – I had to cover as team leader. I'd got three lots of classes to cover. I said to my group, "here, I'll be five minutes because I've got to go, if anyone comes in tell them where I am." And he walks into the room and says, "she's not in, then?" and turns and walks out before this poor student could even say, "yes, but she's..." And the immediate thing was, if I wasn't in the room at two minutes past nine, I hadn't bothered turning up, and that – that's the bit that – if the Principal – "has she been in?" Find out, because it's just his judgement, if you're not in your room, you're off skiving somewhere, and I was rushing round covering two classes.'* (Julie – Teacher)

The sense of being constantly measured and monitored is exacerbated by the perception that the information generated is not used effectively, that it is merely collected for the sake of it:

*'One of the things I found not valuing is producing 13 pages of report, and you feed it into the gaping maw of management, and what appears is one line saying, you know, "the service did well, as usual". ... I think if somebody picked up on your report and said, "oh, that was different to last year" or "why do you think that's happened?" or "is that something you're addressing next?" – that would be valuing. ... but, you know, I don't mind doing the work if there's some purpose to it, but it's not a big incentive to do all that if somebody's just going to produce a line at the end of the day and actually not comment on it.'*  
(Michelle – Administrative Support)

The previous extract flags up a contradiction which recurs in the data, namely staff wanting regular, personal contact with their leaders, but viewing all attempts by leaders to interact with them as being either contrived or a form of checking up or both. The following dialogue illustrates the dilemma for college principals in this respect. Suzie, a teacher, has at an early stage of the focus group expressed the desire for more personal contact with senior managers, for them to be seen about the college and to interact informally with staff, as well as in a manner which demonstrates their knowledge of the work the individual does and the issues they are facing. She later complains that when senior managers do greet her in the corridor or praise her work, they are not being 'genuine' about what they say, and are only 'paying lip service to what they have to do.' The dialogue then continues:

*Researcher: How easy is it for them to have a genuine reason to come into your workroom and talk to you? I mean, are they automatically going to look like they're just coming in ...*

*Suzie: Well, the only reason they come in is to inspect you and find fault and go away again.*

*Researcher: So, in that sense, it is actually difficult for them to make a genuine connection?*

*Suzie: I wouldn't want them in my workroom, but you do see them around college and then ... yeah, if he comes into the staff room for a cup of tea, just to mingle, I appreciate that.*

# Leadership as 'Emotional Labour'

In the light of this 'damned if they do, damned if they don't' attitude on the part of some staff, and the perceived importance of valuing practices as a contributing factor in staff performance, it is not surprising that principals and their senior managers devote considerable time and effort to trying to address this issue. This entails not just such practical requirements as maintaining fair and transparent appraisal, reward and promotion procedures, but also considerable 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) on their behalf. In her seminal work *The Managed Heart* (1983) Hochschild drew attention to the increasing requirement for staff to manage their emotions such that they express only those deemed appropriate to a given situation, such as the fixed smile and friendly, helpful manner of airline cabin crew – even in the face of the most difficult, unappreciative passenger. Such emotional labour is not necessarily inauthentic. So for example, when asked whether leadership was a performance, one Principal responded:

*'It's an effort of will – one which I find I'm naturally able to make. I couldn't live a myth. I could not sustain a performance which fundamentally is not me. And I've come to recognise that I can (make that natural effort), but not everybody can. And of course, I have my bad days and if I have a bad day, that's nobody else's fault. I can choose how I respond.'* (Patricia – Principal)

That it is still a labour, however – an active piece of management from which the principal can, on occasion, require a respite – is indicated by the following acknowledgement from Patricia. Quoted above as saying that her professional performance as a happy, supportive, positive principal is an effort of will which she finds easy to make because it is congruent with her natural persona, she goes on to say:

*'The only place where I am ever miserable is within my immediate office, with the people who work immediately to me. Because if I walk down the corridor looking unhappy and that person hasn't seen me for three months, they will then regard me as inconsistent. So you have to also bear in mind the frequency and the context in which people see you, what their expectations are, and of course, if I'm going to maintain my sanity, I have to have the option of completely losing it!'* (Patricia – Principal)

# Conclusions: Why Feeling Valued Matters

The idea of the 'happy, productive worker' (Staw, 1996) has long been the Holy Grail of organizational research, recognising the need to understand factors which determine performance, and what prompts employees to bring their 'whole selves' to work rather than just their technical skills. This working paper has begun to document some of the mundane practices associated with valuing and feeling valued and as such it expands understanding of emotional labour in professional, and particularly leadership, roles. Further research is needed to provide a more detailed elaboration of 'valuing practices' as a form of mundane work within a leadership context, to more clearly understand what work such practices set out to do, and to explore how such practices are integrated with other aspects of leadership work.

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# 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 education leaders from various institutions over long periods. The research will be 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 have been 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 the 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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