Bridging the Gap with Teamwork: Collaborative Leadership for Communities of Practice in the Lifelong Learning Sector

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Abstract

Collaborative approaches in leadership and management are increasingly acknowledged to play a key role in successful institutions in the lifelong learning sector (LLS) (Ofsted, 2004). Such approaches may be important in bridging the potential ‘distance’ (psychological, cultural, interactional and geographical) (Collinson, 2005) that may exist between ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’, fostering more democratic communal solidarity. This paper reports on a 2006-07 research project funded by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) that aimed to collect and analyse data on ‘collaborative leadership’ (CL) in the learning and skills sector. The project investigated collaborative leadership and its potential for benefiting staff through trust and knowledge-sharing in communities of practice (CoPs). The project forms part of longer-term educational research investigating leadership within an emancipatory action research critical theory framework, in which a research team is trialling improvements in leadership, management and professionalism by modelling the work of CoPs using a collaborative inquiry process (Jameson et al., 2006). Using an online survey research design in surveymonkey, the project collected and analysed 221 survey responses on collaborative leadership from a range of participants in or connected with the sector, investigating CL and its relationship with other leadership concepts and management practices. The research examined the potential for CL to benefit institutions, analysing the extent of respondents’ understanding of, interest in and actual or potential resistance to collaborative practices. Collecting and analysing both quantitative and qualitative data from senior managers through to lecturers using electronic data analysis in SPSS and Tropes Zoom, the project aimed to recommend systems and practices to encourage more concerted, inclusive and diverse leadership practices (Lumby et al., 2005). Collaborative leadership has increasingly gained international prominence as emphasis has shifted towards team leadership beyond zero-sum ‘leadership’/’followership’ polarities into more mature conceptions of shared leadership spaces, within which synergistic collaboration may be mediated. The relevance of collaboration within the LSS has been highlighted following a spate of recent government-driven policy developments relating to further education. The promotion of CL addresses numerous existing concerns about the apparent ‘remoteness’ of some senior managers, and the ‘neo-management’ control of professionals which can increase ‘distance’ between leaders and ‘followers’ and may de-professionalise staff in an already disempowered sector. Positive benefit from ‘collaborative advantage’ tends to be assumed in idealistic interpretations of CL, but potential ‘collaborative inertia’ may be problematic in a sector characterised by rapid top-down policy changes measured through continuous external audit and surveillance. Constant pressure for achievement against goals leaves little time for democratic group negotiations, despite the desires of leaders to create a more collaborative ethos. Yet prior models of intentional communities of practice potentially offer promise for CL practice to improve group performance despite multiple constraints. The CAMEL CoP model (Collaborative Approaches to the Management of e-Learning; JISC infoNet, 2006) was cited in and linked to the project, providing one potential practical way of implementing CL within situated professional networks. The project found that a good understanding of collaborative leadership was demonstrated by most respondents, who thought CL could enable staff to share power and work in partnership to build trust and conjoint skills, abilities and experience to achieve common goals for the good of the sector. However, although most respondents expressed agreement with the concept and ideals of CL, many thought this was currently an ideologically democratic, unachievable pipe dream in the LSS. Many respondents expressed significant concerns with a prevailing audit culture and authoritarian management structures. While there was a strong desire to see greater levels of implementation of CL in the sector, and ‘collaborative advantage’ from the ‘knowledge sharing benefit potential’ of team leadership, respondents also strongly advised against the pitfalls of ‘collaborative inertia’. A marked ‘distance’ between senior leadership views and those of staff lower down the hierarchy regarding aspects of leadership performance in the sector was reported. Finally, the project found that more research on collaborative leadership is needed to investigate and critique CL and develop innovative methods of practical implementation within autonomous communities of professional practice.

Introduction

Leadership is sometimes conceptualised as a ‘zero-sum’ competitive game (von Neumann and Morgenstern, 1944) in which ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’ are polarised, so that if one side ‘wins’, the other must inevitably ‘lose’. Leaders participating in situations involving conflict may also engage in thinly disguised struggles for power with other leaders or ‘followers’, in which ‘success’ for one group leads to ‘failure’ for others. Such power struggles can involve increasingly bitter exchanges in which people are engaged in rivalry, hostility and competitive ‘point-scoring’, leading to tensely negative organisational situations. This may arguably give rise to endless strategic and operational problems. Sometimes, such rivalries can accelerate organisational tensions out of all proportion to the initiating cause, so that institutions become negatively affected in complex, unforeseen ways. In political situations around the globe, we
have seen the dire consequences that can emerge when nations suffer under unrelenting ‘zero-sum’ conflicts. More locally, in educational institutions, institutional failures can accrue when leaders are seen as being ‘at war’ in a game of ‘win’ or ‘lose’ with staff or other leaders.

By contrast, when both leaders and ‘followers’ perceive that institutional situations can achieve ‘non-zero-sum’ benefits for all, there is an increased potential for enriched learning by leaders and staff from both success and failure. However, the idea that ‘non-zero-sum’ situations are worth cultivating, and that mutual success is a worthy option, requires mature recognition of the possibility that ‘win-win’ gains can transcend the singular interests of one or other ‘side’. Such acceptance also requires some ability to empathise with the needs and interests of other parties. Further, mature understanding of successful organisational leadership may bring awareness that the capacity to collaborate in negotiated power-sharing with others is a key attribute of ‘non-zero-sum’ leadership. Proactive engagement with some form of collaboration in leadership and management seems, in fact, to play a key role in successful institutions in the lifelong learning sector (LLS) (Ofsted, 2004), though the extent to which this involves genuine power-sharing does need to be questioned. Nevertheless, such shared approaches may be important as a way in which to bridge the ‘distance’ (psychological, cultural, interactional and geographical) (Collinson, 2005) that may exist between ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’ in LLS institutions. Arguably, a more democratic and communal solidarity within staff groups may be fostered through the facilitation of collaboration in leadership.

This paper reports on a 2006-07 research project funded by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) that aimed to collect and analyse data on ‘collaborative leadership’ (CL) in the lifelong learning sector. The project investigated collaborative leadership and its potential for benefiting staff through trust and knowledge-sharing in communities of practice. The project forms part of longer-term educational research investigating leadership within an emancipatory action research critical theory framework, in which a research team is trialling improvements in leadership, management and professionalism by modelling the work of CoPs using a collaborative inquiry process.

**Methodology**

The research project used an online survey research design in surveymonkey, collecting and analysing 221 survey responses on collaborative leadership from a range of participants in or connected with the LL sector, investigating CL and its relationship with other leadership concepts and management practices. The research examined the potential for CL to benefit institutions, analysing the extent of respondents’ understanding of, interest in and actual or potential resistance to collaborative practices. Collecting and analysing both quantitative and qualitative data from senior managers through to lecturers using electronic data analysis in SPSS and Tropes Zoom, the project aimed to recommend systems and practices to encourage more concerted, inclusive and diverse leadership practices (Lumby et al., 2005). The online tool was used for data collection in a web-based leadership survey designed by the applicant. The overall research design was that of descriptive medium-scale survey research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000), to provide descriptive, inferential and explanatory information across a field of issues relating to leadership in the LSS. The survey aimed to collect views from staff at all levels in the sector and with knowledge of it. The generalised nature of the survey was retained for accurate data collection and analysis across a range of occupational and interest groups. The issue of collaboration was addressed holistically within broader debates on leadership and management and staff in the LSS. The role of the researcher was relatively remote: online web-based survey research may sometimes attract more responses from participants than interviews or paper-based surveys, owing to the relative convenience, anonymity and ease with which people can fill these in.
Findings

Overall, 221 survey responses were received during two phases of data collection using two main survey designs in surveymonkey.com from a wide range of participants in or connected with the sector. The first phase of the survey collected 79 responses, while 142 responses were collected in the second phase. Respondents were from or working directly with the LSS. Replies were received from 43 respondents in management roles. These included 14 respondents at Principal/CEO level in FE/ Sixth Form Colleges/ ACL. There were also 28 respondents in the first survey and 50 respondents in the second who skipped the question about occupational role.
The majority of respondents to the first phase (75.5%, or 40 respondents) were from General FE colleges, with 3 from sixth form colleges/centres, 1 from adult education, 4 from HE/FE colleges, 1 from an LSC organisation; plus 3 ‘others’ from ACL/HE/FE or ACL LEA-funded, i.e. a total of 52 (98%) respondents declaring their organisation was funded by or directly connected with the sector. The one university respondent in phase 1 had extensive knowledge of the LLS. Responses to the second phase by organisational type are illustrated in Figure 1. In Survey 2, there were a smaller number of General FE College respondents, but the numbers from adult education HE-FE colleges, specialist FE colleges and universities were higher. Staff who answered the second survey were also predominantly at lower
hierarchical levels than in Survey 1. A range of different types of respondents answered the second survey. Numerous direct approaches were also made to the investigator to comment on/make queries about/ the survey.

Overall, the 221 respondents to both Survey 1 and 2 included staff at different levels in FE, adult education, sixth form, vocational training, universities, staff unions and learning and skills sector agencies. Respondents were working full-time, part-time, were recently retired or were doing contracted research and consultancy work at a wide range of levels. Survey responses revealed that a number of participants were at very senior management levels in the LSS, but that some preferred not to reveal their positions. Some top managers may have been sensitive about responding to a leadership survey. However, the researcher was impressed with several senior leadership responses which highlighted that leaders were handling these issues with sensitivity, fairness, honesty, accurate representation and rigour. Safeguards regarding accuracy and rigour of data collection include the fact that surveymonkey data can be filtered down to individual responses to separate out categories of staff.

Discussion

Main survey findings indicated that most respondents were able to demonstrate a good understanding of ‘collaborative leadership’. The majority of respondents answering survey questions on ‘collaborative leadership’ were strongly in favour of CL. However, many acknowledged there were problems and impediments to the implementation of CL. There are many rhetorically pleasing ‘sound-bites’ about collaboration, but the extent to which this concept really makes sense to people in the learning and skills sector and can in fact actually be implemented needs further exploration and development. Many expressed doubts about the potential for really achieving practical implementation of ‘collaborative leadership’ in FE.

Most respondents were relatively positive about the clarity and task-focused nature of senior leadership performance in the LLS, but were more querulous when it came to the question of senior management comprehension of and empathy with staff and the problems they faced in their work at all levels. Many respondents were concerned that senior leaders were distanced from staff and did not understand them. Overall, the findings also revealed that some respondents regard the concept of ‘collaborative leadership’ as a ‘buzzword’ and expected it to be like any of the other ‘management fads’ that rapidly arise in popularity and fade away.

However, most respondents gave a clear understanding of CL and its role in improving the way staff are treated. The data indicated a divide in views on sectoral performance, with staff at lower hierarchical levels tending to be more likely to describe the management culture in their organisations as authoritarian and task-focused, by contrast with senior leaders, who tended to prefer to describe the management culture as ‘team management’. Some LLS staff, particularly those at lower hierarchical levels, remained sceptical of the extent to which senior managers understood them. Staff at all levels were also in general critical about the capacity of the sector to engage in collaborative leadership, despite the potential attractions of this model of power-sharing. Specific developmental initiatives to foster collaboration in leadership may be necessary, for example through models provided by communities of practice (CoPs). However, since this depends in part on respondent self-selection, this finding needs to be tested with further research.

Most staff responding thought that CL could enable staff to share power and work in partnership to build trust and to conjoin skills, abilities and experience to achieve common goals for the good of the sector. Many respondents were in favour of CL in principle. However, a common view was that, despite the attractiveness of CL, this model of leadership might not be realistic in the current FE climate. Many respondents expressed concerns with the audit culture and top-down management in the LLS. ‘Collaborative leadership’ was
therefore envisaged by many respondents as an ideologically democratic but unachievable pipe dream in the lifelong learning sector.

Figure 2: Phase 1 and 2 responses to Q6 on senior leaders understanding staff

Further findings were that most respondents at lower hierarchical levels thought senior leaders did not understand them, while respondents at senior leadership hierarchical levels thought they did understand their staff (see Figures 2-4).

Figure 3: 18 Survey 1 SMT responses to Q6 on senior leaders understanding their staff
Regarding organisational culture, the highest number of respondents at lower hierarchical levels thought their organisational culture could be described as ‘authority-compliance management’, whereas the highest number of respondents at senior leadership hierarchical levels thought their organisational culture could be described as ‘team management’ (see Figure 5). This dichotomy between leaders and followers indicates the kind of ‘distance’ that
can grow up between senior leaders and their staff. However, more optimistically, most respondents (62%) agreed that senior leaders gave staff clear strategic directions, though a large minority (22%) disagreed with this, including a small number (8%) who ‘strongly disagreed’.

Figure 6: Selected from 57 responses to Q17 on implementing ‘collaborative leadership’

A large majority of survey respondents clearly understood the idea of and potential for CL, giving a number of thoughtful replies, mainly in support of CL as an ideal, but expressed some concerns about achievability, as for example this respondent indicated:

CL is a nice idea. However, in all organisations the desire to achieve a post-Taylorist non performative drive work environment is always vulnerable. It is always the first thing to disappear when money is tight or new performance targets are invented. Managers at all levels always resort to Taylorist models of...
command and control as this old way of working makes them feel safe when times are getting tough. FE has been tough for the last 15 yrs -since 1992.
(Respondent 29 to Q17 Survey 2, 2007)

Responses from staff to Q15-17 (a selection of which are illustrated in Figure 6) tended to indicate considerable doubt about the practicability of achieving CL, combined, somewhat paradoxically, with great interest in and support for the concept itself. A minority regarded ‘collaborative leadership’ as a ‘buzzword’, like other ‘management fads’ that rapidly arise in popularity and quickly fade away, but the majority were in support of both the concept and practice of CL.

**Conclusion**

Methods for developing best practice in ‘collaborative leadership’ to encourage more communal socially engaged networking approaches to leadership and management are recommended to reduce the distances between ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’, in the interest of shared aims for co-creating improvements within the sector. Recommendations for best practice in CL, systems and practices to encourage more communal socially engaged networking approaches to leadership and management are suggested regarding the appropriacy of, and selected methods for, developing ‘collaborative leadership’.

Conscious adoption of values-based distributed and collaborative forms of team leadership in the LSS to develop trust and enable genuine dialogue between practitioners can be encouraged at all levels. This is needed for the benefit of knowledge exchange between different layers of the hierarchy, of the kind that takes place in a CoP. Recent research (Mehra et al., 2006, Jameson et al., 2006, Jameson, 2007) indicates that leadership of a distributed-coordinated and collaborative kind is more effective for higher team performance than either traditional leader-centred or fully distributed leadership models.

This investigation, reported more fully in Jameson (2007), built on prior research to propose a new model for distributed-coordinated collaborative team leadership linked with communities of e-learning practice. The literature review found that clear theorisation and evidence-based documentation linked to actualised implementations of ‘collaborative leadership’ within the LSS needs to be given greater priority in leadership development initiatives. Those seeking to set up more collaborative structures can develop team leadership groups to tackle particular tasks, e.g. in college strategic and operational plans.

Team performance in leadership groups is crucially affected by the degree to which the team involved has high levels of social and project management skills and fosters reflexivity to improve practice. These skills can be facilitated and enhanced through collaborative leadership development programmes. Conscious adoption of values-based distributed, collaborative forms of team leadership in the LSS to develop trust and enable genuine dialogue between practitioners can be encouraged at all levels. This is needed for the benefit of knowledge exchange between different layers of the hierarchy, of the kind that takes place in a professional community of practice.

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References


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