



Learning Consultancy Partnership

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Growing Leadership Talent

In Further Education

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The context of leadership within further education

The rapidly changing landscape of the further education (FE) sector provides both opportunities and challenges for existing and evolving leaders at all levels. Since the introduction of the Learning Skills Council (LSC) in 2001, there has been increasing interest in further education resulting in a plethora of new initiatives, agendas, policies and practices. The LSC's goal is **“to improve the skills of England's young people and adults to ensure we have a workforce of world-class standard”** and in order to achieve this, the Government wants to see greater innovation, increased flexibility and more partnership working to ensure employers and learners needs are met and that the right skills are in place for economic growth to meet the skill needs of 2020 identified by the Leitch review.

In 2010, subject to an Act of Parliament, the LSC will close down and funds will be distributed by local authorities and a new skills funding agency as laid out in the white paper 'Raising Expectations: enabling the system to deliver'. This means that there is a window of opportunity for further education providers to review and plan their leadership development before the changes take place.

Despite the sheer amount of information and activity, there remain some core underlying themes in FE that can be used to inform succession planning and leader development programmes. The Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) (now LSIS), and the Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills (DIUS) have both highlighted the need for FE colleges and training providers to become more commercial by adopting a 'demand-led' and 'customer-driven' approach. DIUS also stress the importance of providing economically useful skills and developing innovative and collaborative learning routes that respond to the needs of learners and employers alike.

In an attempt to pursue excellence and deliver against the change agenda the FE sector is now focusing more on self-regulation, self-assessment and self-improvement, which is being supported by the newly formed Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), an amalgamation of CEL and the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA).

“LSIS will focus on learners and on developing excellent and sustainable further education and skills provision across the sector. Leadership development will underpin and form an important part of the organisation’s strategic role in the sector.”

(LSIS website, 2008)

In particular, FE leaders now need to deliver against a number of areas such as:

- Providing the resources, including staff, to meet the growth in demand for 14-19 education and training.
- Including more young people in further education by targeting those not currently in education, employment or training.
- Improving employer and learner choice through a more tailored curriculum, joint initiatives and partnership working.
- Building the capacity to meet a ‘demand-led’ system through collaborative working with employers.
- Influencing policy by getting involved in strategic local partnerships that have an education or training dimension.
- Providing robust financial control, governance and assessment strategies.
- Building and marketing the FE brand so there is greater recognition of the role FE colleges and training providers play in their local communities.

Challenges for leaders in further education

With this agenda of change and greater engagement with multiple internal and external contacts, providing a systematic approach to leadership development and succession planning is critical in attracting and retaining talented leaders. For FE colleges and training providers to be successful, leaders will need to spend more time on developing, managing and sustaining partnership arrangements as well as ensuring there are robust quality assurance and financial control systems in place. They must also plan strategically within a multi-agency, post-16 environment and lead others through change by building the FE brand internally as well as externally.

There are resources available to help leaders with their career and development planning; organisations like LSIS and NCSL (National College for School Leadership), offer a range of support mechanisms such as workshops, seminars, e-learning, networking and one-on-one support through coaching. There are also a number of academic qualifications on offer, tailored for the education sector, for example the MA in Leadership and Management (Further Education) or the shorter programmes accredited by the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM), for new and middle managers.

Although the FE sector does have unique challenges there are also many areas where leaders face similar issues in other sectors. Estyn, the Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales, argued that the Principal's role in FE can be compared to the CEO role in business in terms of scope, responsibility and complexity. It is not just the education sector that is facing a leadership shortage; the current leadership population is ageing and some are rapidly heading towards retirement so developing talented leaders for the future is high on many organisations' agendas. In NCSL's report "Leadership Succession: An Overview" they found that nearly 25% of head teachers were over 55 years old and that on average, it takes 20 years to become a head. This means that the passive 'bubble up' approach to leadership development, where potential leaders rise to the top through years of hard work, is no longer

acceptable as time is running out. Rather, senior FE leaders now need to take on the mantle and proactively identify and develop the leaders of the future to fill the shortages and deliver the 2020 targets.

In their book 'Grow your own leaders' Byham, Smith and Paese (2001), argue the case for effective succession management systems that focus on both talent growth and talent retention. They introduce the idea of 'Acceleration Pools' where high potential individuals are given responsibility for their own development whilst supported by the organisation and senior managers.

"An Acceleration Pool is a systematic method for identifying and developing high-potential people to fill targeted levels of management. Development of pool members is accelerated through stretch job and task force assignments that offer the best learning and highest visibility opportunities"

(Grow your own leaders. Byham, Smith and Paese (2002), p.351)

They argue that one size doesn't fit all and development plans should be tailored to ensure individuals leverage their strengths and develop their weaker areas in line with both personal goals and strategic objectives.

Top managers must own the system and be actively involved as coaches and mentors and immediate line managers also play a key role in providing the resources and opportunities to apply learning back at work (*in our experience this can never be stressed enough*).

Jim Collins in his book 'Good to Great' agrees, he found that highly effective leaders (known as level 5 leaders), work at developing their successors and are comfortable with the idea that the next generation will be more successful than they are, as their focus is on developing a great and sustainable company rather than personal glory. Collins noticed that these level 5

leaders built superior executive teams and chose the right people for the right jobs resulting in companies that were flexible enough to survive regardless of how the world was changing around them.

Stephen Covey (The Speed of Trust, 2006), believes that successful organisations are reliant on the level of trust they develop and that in the new global economy the ability to establish, grow, extend and restore trust is a critical leadership competency. He argues that effective leaders ensure their organisational structures and systems are aligned to the core organisational beliefs, values and behaviours and those who build trust with their internal stakeholders will benefit from accelerated growth, enhanced innovation, improved collaboration and stronger partnerships, all of these critical outcomes for FE leaders.

In summary

This paper was difficult to write just in terms of the volume of information available and we apologise for any glaring omissions. What is clear is that leaders in FE are experiencing rapid change and a drive to become more self-sufficient. There are organisations available to support FE leaders in their development but it is also important to keep an eye on the business world as, as we have already discussed, there are many similarities in the challenges ahead.

Senior leaders need to own leadership development activities within their organisations and build a systematic succession planning process that provides talented individuals with the support they need to accelerate their own development, with support from external agencies like LSIS.

Building trust and accelerating the development of high potential people will be critical if there is not to be a skills shortage of senior leaders and principals in the future. It is now time

to focus on middle and evolving leaders so they will be ready, willing and able to take on the challenges of the future and meet the targets set for 2020.

As a final comment, here are a few of the questions posed by Collins in his book, which we hope will provide food for thought.

- *Has your organisation experienced long-term vacancies in key leadership positions?*
- *Have the challenges faced by your top leaders changed significantly over the last 5-10 years?*
- *Would your current executives say they felt adequately prepared for their top management role when they first took it on?*

Bibliography

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