

Leadership insights from beyond the Sector

The Education & Training Foundation

Tristram Hughes
Ben Berryman
Jonathan Sheen

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For more information about this report please contact
Tristram Hughes:

CFE Research, Phoenix Yard, Upper Brown Street, Leicester,
LE1 5TE

T: 0116 229 3300 tristram.hughes@cfe.org.uk
www.cfe.org.uk

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Executive summary

This report describes leadership approaches and insights from beyond the Education and Skills sector that are supporting leaders to respond to the challenges facing modern organisations.

The Education & Training Foundation commissioned CFE Research in January 2014 to contribute a report on leadership insights from beyond the Education and Skills sector. We undertook a review of evidence, using a high level review of relevant literature, supported by 15 expert and practitioner interviews.

Huge challenges face organisations, states and individuals in the coming decades. Economic and environmental volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity are hallmarks of the 21st century for organisations of all types. Approaches to leadership which only focus on individuals' competencies or traits are becoming increasingly insufficient for organisations today. New trends are emerging in how leadership is implemented and conceived across organisations and sectors, with greater emphasis on collaborative approaches, where leadership may be distributed within an organisation, or even across multiple organisations. Equally, ways for leaders to understand and interpret the complexity around them and respond appropriately are becoming more important. The themes outlined below emerged strongly from the research and formed the key insights of the report.

Distributing leadership within an organisation

- Distributed leadership aims to unlock the potential for leadership at a range of levels or parts of an organisation, rather than conceiving leadership as something that only comes from the “top”. In practice, people at various levels of an organisation are capable of taking action and leading change, while participating and benefiting from a collaborative culture and environment. In this way, the collective expertise of many staff helps to drive improvement and success.
- Principles of distributed leadership can be formally encouraged through organisational practices. Steps towards this are being seen in the schools sector, childcare and healthcare, as well as in the private sector.
- Within the schools sector, where authority and accountability is distributed widely, it is argued that teachers are more effective and expect higher standards from students. Research has suggested that by positively affecting staff motivation and performance, distributed leadership ensures higher student achievement rates.
- The experts interviewed for this project emphasised that clarity of organisational purpose, vision and values are vital if leadership responsibilities are to become distributed. This clarity of purpose

necessarily tends to come from those at the “top” of the organisation, and in practice this is a core responsibility for higher level leaders.

Sharing leadership beyond an organisation

- Economic challenges, public sector funding reductions, but also changing views on how public services should be funded and delivered are prompting many organisations to review their approaches and seek a more collegiate approach to achieving objectives. In some publicly funded sectors there is a strong recognition that, beyond just representing and influencing other stakeholders, leaders must be able to actually play a leadership role to others well beyond only their own staff.
- As well as “on the ground” links between organisations to support leadership and improvement, systems leadership responses can also seek to encourage leaders to take on more formalised leadership roles shaping how peer organisations or whole sectors develop, respond to challenges and drive change. These concepts are well-developed in the schools sector.
- The obvious challenge in leading creating systems leadership approaches across several peer organisations is the possibility of competition, which can undermine attempts at collaboration. As with distributing leadership within organisations, the aim would be to discover common ground and areas of mutual benefit, or to produce appropriate forums, and potentially neutral brokers, through which collaboration can function.
- Before leaders can step outside their organisation to support other organisations or wider sector objectives, they must be confident that their own projects will not suffer through their absence. Creating capacity within an organisation can be necessary, with sufficient staff to cover the core leadership functions of the organisation itself, as well as systems leadership functions.

The importance of context

- Understanding and responding to context is crucial to leadership and leaders in all sectors need to be aware of the context of their organisation, its operating environment and objectives in order to inform their approaches. In the modern business world, public sector, and in the Education and Skills sector, increasing complexity is leading to an increasing need for leaders to consciously detect, reflect on, and act on, their contexts.
- Context sensing skills can be developed and there are basic things that leaders can do to improve their awareness of context. One simple solution for sensing context within a leader’s own organisation is by creating informal ways of communicating with members of staff instead of relying purely on traditional or rigid communication routes.
- It may also be appropriate for leaders to use specific tools or frameworks to seek a greater understanding and insight into their context. Frameworks that encourage reflection on the core components of an organisation’s work – its resources, people, objectives, political and environmental context – are being developed, and can be drawn on to aid the context sensing and interpreting process.
- Sector leadership strategies need to retain enough flexibility to enable adaptability within and across organisations, to respond to different challenges and contexts. Once a context is understood, an appropriate leadership response can then be implemented, depending on the



needs that are presented. Often this can happen naturally, almost instinctively, once a context is understood more fully. Because of the variations in context, tools to sense and respond may be more useful than one-size-fits-all approaches to leadership development.

Conclusions

- The broad banner of collaborative approaches to leadership, and the importance of understanding and interpreting context, have become increasingly important to the world of business and public sector delivery. We suggest that the Education and Skills sector has a particular need for collaborative and context specific approaches to leadership. The sector by its nature is one of multiple actors, interest groups and stakeholders. As well as providers themselves, and their staff, there is an overarching funding agency, sector representative bodies, and government itself as the key driver of policy and funding context. Equally, training providers have core obligations to their learners, employers and often to their wider communities, whose interests and well-being must be considered as a core mission.
- The Education and Skills sector already has a good story to tell on pioneering collaborative approaches to leadership, as evidenced by the collaborative forums that already exist in the sector, and the collective approach to representing sector interests to government. At the same time, some practice in the sector could benefit from a renewed focus encouraging greater moves towards collaborative approaches, and away from more traditional top-down, command and control approaches.
- We argue that it is clear that new ways of viewing leadership and how it responds to complexity should be a key priority for the sector's leaders. The Education and Skills sector should take the best and most relevant of different available concepts on leadership and forge their own bespoke conception that fits the needs and realities of the sector. Articulating a common sense of what is important for the sector, and for its leadership, as the Education and Training Foundation is aiming to do, will be an invaluable step in taking collective steps to support leadership development in the sector.

01. Introduction and method

This report describes leadership approaches and insights from beyond the Education and Skills sector that are supporting leaders to respond to the challenges facing modern organisations. We focus on collaborative approaches and context sensing as possible ways to improve leadership outcomes.

Project background and aims

The Education & Training Foundation commissioned CFE Research in January 2014 to contribute a report on leadership insights from beyond the Education and Skills sector.

The Education and Training Foundation was established in August 2013 with an overarching remit to improve professionalism and standards in the Education and Skills sector. The Foundation's central responsibility is to ensure learners benefit from the development of a well-qualified, effective and up-to-date workforce supported by good leadership, management and governance.

The purpose of this project is to contribute to an initial evidence review to inform the work of the Foundation in this area with insights into leadership trends and discussions outside of the Education and Skills sector, by:

- investigating innovative and effective approaches to leadership;
- sharing issues around leadership that might be similar to those of the Education and Skills sector; and
- discovering innovative solutions to issues that have potential to be transferable to the Education and Skills sector.

The Foundation is particularly interested in thinking around leadership models and approaches, such as systems leadership and dispersed models of leadership, and the use of technology to explore issues around leadership.

The Foundation's objectives in commissioning this review were to generate a short report identifying innovative practice and key insights from arenas beyond education and skills that will assist it in the development of programmes and

services in this area, and also inform the Foundation's consultations and communications with the Education and Skills sector.

Method

In undertaking this review of evidence, the core methods used were a high level review of relevant literature, and 15 expert and practitioner interviews. At the initial stages of the project, in consultation with the Foundation, we narrowed the focus of the study to certain key models and concepts that could be influential or of interest to the Education and Skills sector, namely, distributed models of leadership, systems leadership, and the importance of context to leadership. Each of these has an associated body of literature and examples from industry or other sectors. Our approach to the interviews and the literature review was not exhaustive, but we believe we have highlighted concepts and opinions of interest to the sector.

The individuals we interviewed were:

- Chris Bones, Professor at Manchester Business School, Founding Partner at Good Growth Limited and author of Cult of the Leader
- Dr Alison Fox, Senior Lecturer in Education at the School of Education, University of Leicester
- Robert Hill, independent education consultant, who has been an advisor within the No. 10 policy unit, special advisor on education and authored Achieving more together: adding value through partnerships, and a major report on the growth of academy chains
- Jit Jethwa, Managing Director at i3 Consultancy Ltd, working with a range of public and private sector organisations
- Gareth Jones, Fellow of the Centre for Management Development at London Business School and a visiting professor at IE Business School (Instituto de Empresa) in Madrid. Gareth is the co-author of Why Should Anyone Be Led by You? with Rob Goffee
- Anne Marshall, Director at Target HR Delivery working with a range of public and private sector organisations
- Nigel Paine, is an internationally respected author and corporate learning expert based in London; he is MD of nigelpaine.com Ltd
- Steve Radcliffe, Creator of Future, Engage, Deliver and author of Leadership Plain and Simple
- John West-Burnham, Professor of Educational Leadership, St Mary's University and author of Rethinking Educational Leadership
- Simon Western, Director of Analytic-Network Coaching Ltd and author of Leadership, a Critical Text
- Ksenia Zheltoukhova, Research Associate at CIPD
- An HR professional within an automotive manufacturer

- An expert delivering leadership programmes for the children’s services sector
- An expert delivering leadership programmes in the independent schools sector
- An HR professional within a large insurance organisation

A note on leadership

Leadership as a concept can be interpreted in various ways, and there is not always agreement or a standard approach to this. A report by Bolden summarises the definitional issues associated with leadership succinctly:

There is no widely accepted definition of leadership, no common consensus on how best to develop leadership and leaders, and remarkably little evidence of the impact of leadership or leadership development on performance and productivity. Indeed, most initiatives appear to actively avoid addressing these issues and simply opt for the feel good factor of doing something about it... whatever ‘it’ may be!¹

The Education and Training Foundation on another of its recent projects into leadership has used a deliberately broad interpretation of the term “leader”, encompassing those in formal leadership positions, aspiring to these, as well as staff in middle/junior management roles or who lead in various ways in their job roles. Although leaders are often characterised as those ‘at the top’ of an organisation, it is common to recognise that many individuals within organisations can contribute to aspects of leadership. Literature on the theory of leadership abounds with definitions of leadership that range from the simple and tautological (e.g., “the only definition of a leader is someone who has followers”²) to more esoteric definitions. In this report we do not attempt to resolve these longstanding issues, but we recognise that leadership can be wielded widely across organisations and highlight how leadership responses are evolving in response to new challenges.

Leadership responds to a complex and uncertain world

Huge challenges face organisations, states and individuals in the coming decades. Economic and environmental volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity are

¹ Bolden, R., ‘What is Leadership?’ *Leadership South West Research Report 1*, (2004), p.3.

² Drucker, P.F., ‘Your Leadership is Unique’, *Christianity Today*, Vol 17(4), p. 54.



hallmarks of the 21st century for organisations of all types. Improving and refining leadership in and across organisations is becoming an area of ever greater focus, accompanied by greater leadership challenges, owing to the increasing size and complexity of organisations, new technologies, growing international competition and a challenging economic climate.³

One of the experts we interviewed for this project described the changes that leadership must respond to:

Really, we're in a new paradigm, a new century. I work in the education sector, the health sector, and global corporations, and many haven't woken up to the fact that we live in a networked society. This idea of being interdependent and interconnected, it's not just imaginary, it's for real. The way we're interconnected now is fundamentally changing the way we do things. We're just at the beginning of this.

— Simon Western, Director of Analytic-Network Coaching Ltd

Leadership is crucial in the Education and Skills sector, and the sector already has significant strengths in developing and deploying leadership. Education and Skills leaders provide leadership not only to staff, but also to their learners and wider community, and in representing the sector externally and to government. The sector has undergone several challenging years, involving significant changes of policy and funding structures, large reductions in total public funding, and economic challenges affecting learners, employers and the wider community. Although the economy is now showing signs of recovery, further public funding reductions are anticipated into the next Parliament and beyond, as are significant changes to the work of Education and Skills providers, including managing competition, partnerships and accountability. The key challenges for leaders include leading in a changeable policy and funding environment, and managing the balance between competition, institutional distinctiveness and collaboration.

Increasingly organisations in many sectors, as well as leadership theorists and consultants, are considering the ways in which leadership is responding, and should respond, to the uncertainty and complexity we see around us. Earlier discourses that focused on the individual are slowly being replaced by discourses that take account of the need for collaboration between individuals.

I've never seen a senior leader who has ever had any direct control over important decisions; it is all about collaboration. ... They are going to have to try and get colleagues to work together in

³ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, Leadership and Management in the UK – The Key to Sustainable Growth, (July 2012), p. 10.

order to achieve bigger strategic ambitions, and for most colleagues, that doesn't tend to be the instinctive behaviour. So understanding how to build shared agendas and understanding how to find a point of commonality so that people can start to have a shared stake in success, whatever you're trying to achieve, is one of the critical skills.

— Chris Bones, Manchester Business School

Much emphasis has been placed in literature on achieving the right balance of qualities, capabilities and attitude in individual leaders to ensure success. However, approaches to leadership which only focus on individuals' competencies or traits are becoming increasingly insufficient for organisations today. New trends are emerging in how leadership is implemented and conceived across organisations and sectors, with greater emphasis on collaborative approaches, where leadership may be distributed within an organisation, or even across multiple organisations. Equally, ways for leaders to understand and interpret the complexity around them and respond appropriately are becoming more important.

This report summarises examples of these emerging leadership models and concepts outside the Education and Skills sector, and discusses their relevance or implications for the sector. The report covers firstly two manifestations of collaborative approaches: distributed models of leadership, and leadership beyond single organisations such as systems leadership. Following these models, the report discusses the emphasis on understanding and responding to the context in which an organisation operates, the importance of adaptability, as well as the potential benefits of using simple formulas for leadership success. We have included select quotations from the experts we interviewed where they have given particularly relevant or interesting points. Many of the issues and points made in the report will be familiar to leaders in the Education and Skills sector, but we believe it is valuable to summarise these points and encourage reflection on shared trends inside and outside the sector. The report ends with a conclusion section, arguing that the best points of emerging discourses on leadership need to be synthesised to create the most appropriate mix for the Education and Skills sector, a process in which the Education and Training Foundation can play a key role.

02. Distributing leadership within an organisation

This chapter examines how distributed models of leadership are one expression of collaborative responses to modern leadership challenges, and considers how providing vision can support the distribution of leadership.

It can be tempting to see leadership as coming only from the “top” of an organisation, whether from a Managing Director, CEO or principal, or perhaps from a senior management team. The concept of distributed leadership recognises that, in practice, leadership roles and requirements exist much more widely in organisations – particularly in large organisations. By recognising this, we can better self-consciously empower staff to lead in their own roles, both setting and meeting the shared goals of an organisation. Clarity of purpose and a common vision are crucial elements here, without which distributed leadership could become directionless. Principles of distributed leadership appear to be growing in popularity⁴ and depart from more conventional hierarchical or individual interpretations of leadership. Instead leadership activities can be shared among multiple actors, and involve collaborative interactions across organisational or professional boundaries.⁵ Distributed leadership can be more than simply having ‘more leaders sharing responsibility’, or ‘many leaders at many levels’ in an organisation, and can be considered a fundamental part of an organisation’s practices and philosophy.

Distributed leadership is an essentially contested concept, and remains a matter of ongoing debate. It overlaps and is sometimes used interchangeably with other leadership concepts, such as ‘shared leadership’, ‘collective leadership’, ‘collaborative leadership’ and ‘co-leadership’. However, all have the following three fundamental characteristics:

⁴ Spillane, J., Harris, A., ‘Distributed Leadership through the Looking Glass’, *Management in Education*, Vol.22(1), (2008), p.31.

⁵ Bolden, R., ‘Distributed Leadership in Organisations: A Review of Theory and Research’, *International Journal of Management Reviews*, Vol.13, (2011), p. 251.

- Distribution of leadership away from the top of an organisation to incorporate other levels and/or individuals: The boundaries of leadership are expanded. Therefore individuals or groups from different layers of an organisation may have at least some leadership responsibility.
- Interaction from multiple actors: This includes the sum of leadership input from more leaders, and also the net product of their efforts, which is greater than the sum of their own individual actions.
- Plasticity and sharing of inputs: This involves shared expertise, knowledge and practices within a collaborative culture. The experience and skills of leaders may vary across the organisation, but individual input is shared and adopted, and improved collectively.⁶

In other words, distributed leadership aims to create more leaders at a range of levels or within more parts of an organisation. Each of these leaders is capable of taking action and leading change through their own initiative, while participating and benefiting from a collaborative culture and environment. In this way, the collective expertise of many staff drives improvement and success. Distributed leadership contrasts with more hierarchical structures where the heads or senior managers of particular departments have distinct spheres of influence in which they are largely the dominant influence. Compared with traditional conceptions of hierarchical leadership structures and practices, within organisations that embrace distributed leadership approaches initiative and direction can travel ‘both ways’, rather than just ‘top-down’.

Figure 1, taken from an NHS document discussing the value of distributed leadership, demonstrates how in a distributed leadership model, initiative and direction is driven by all actors, regardless of seniority. Distributed leadership thus enables a more inclusive system based on personal accountability, where the actions and ideas of staff across the organisation are recognised by the whole organisation. The model seeks to influence behaviour, but also to grant permission to individuals at non-senior levels to change something, or make an improvement.

⁶ Bennett, N., Wise, Christine., Woods, P., Harvey, J., *Distributed Leadership: A review of Literature*, (2003), p. 7.

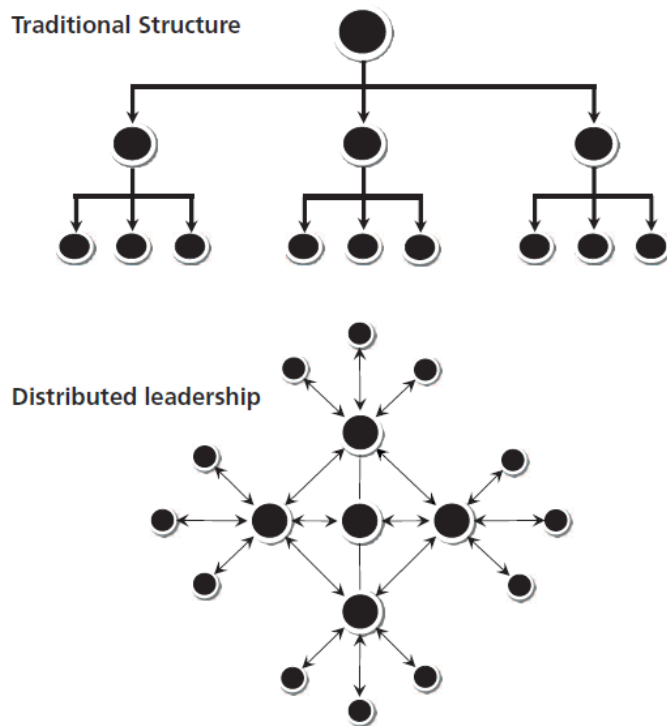


Figure 1: Comparison of hierarchy leadership model and interdependent leadership model (Source: NHS).⁷

Distributed leadership has become popular for several reasons. For some professions, it holds weight as a normative idea (how things *should* be). Distributed leadership may also have grown in response to contextual or sectoral changes that dictate the need for change in existing leadership structures. Crucially, the term has empirical value, evidenced by a growing body of research and literature saying that distributed leadership brings improvements and benefits for organisations and their businesses. Distributed leadership has become an important idea in guidance literature aimed at schools, and has become an ingrained concept within some social movements, that by nature rely upon the shared accountability and input of many supporters.

The principles behind distributed leadership were emphasised by several of our expert interviews, who noted the difference between how leadership can be conceived formally in organisations and how it is actually exercised.

We are still governed and organised with a form hierarchy based on position and power, but the way things really get done is through horizontal dynamics. That's where change really takes place. There's a fantasy that all change takes place in the board room at the top level yet it

⁷ Hilton, K., Lawrence-Pietroni, C., *Leaders Everywhere: The Story of NHS Change Day*, (2013), p. 32.

actually takes place within the organisation mostly through informal unrecognised leadership acts.

— Simon Western, Director of Analytic-Network Coaching Ltd

Leadership is not hierarchical. So being promoted, becoming Managing Director doesn't make you a leader - that is just a position on an organogram. The other important aspect is that leadership is relational; you can't be a leader on your own.

— Gareth Jones, London Business School

Distributed leadership in practice

Principles of distributed leadership can be formally encouraged through organisational practices. Steps towards this are being seen in the schools sector, childcare and healthcare, as well as in the private sector, although in many cases distribution of leadership remains a guiding principle and aspiration.

Schools use a range of leadership approaches depending on their size and purpose, often with a traditional hierarchy-based leadership structure, comprising a head teacher, extending down to deputy heads, often supported by senior support staff. However, there is a significant body of literature (particularly that produced by the National College for Teaching and Leadership) calling for schools to broaden their existing leadership structures as part of a fundamental change in the culture of education leadership. Independent research by Pricewaterhouse Coopers in 2007 suggests that distributing leadership further across the organisation is a potential means of easing some of the workload issues currently faced by school leaders, by making the role more attractive and the size of the job more deliverable.⁸ Where authority and accountability are distributed widely, it is argued that teachers are more effective and expect higher standards from students. Research has suggested that by affecting staff motivation and performance, distributed leadership ensures higher student achievement rates.⁹

Our expert interviews acknowledged that while movement towards distributed leadership is gradual and uneven, the direction of travel is towards a collective form of leadership:

⁸ Pricewaterhousecoopers, *Independent Study into School Leadership*, (2007), p. 8.

⁹ Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., Harris, A., Hopkins, D., *Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership*, (2006) , p. 12.



One of the things in the school system at the moment is very much this notion of moving increasingly towards the idea of leadership as collective capacity.

— John West-Burnham, Professor of Educational Leadership, St Mary's University

The distributed leadership agenda has also been noted in childcare services such as nurseries, pre-school and children's centres.¹⁰ Recent research by the National College for Teaching and Leadership places distributed and collaborative approaches as important elements of leading childcare organisations, particularly devolving power from centre leaders to early years teaching staff. The same research found that the core behaviours of highly effective children's centre leaders included integrated working, open communication and the ability to motivate and empower staff.¹¹ Distributed leadership, and system leadership were noted as key enabling philosophies that allow leaders to understand their role in setting the vision and culture of children's centres, while delivering locally and nationally coordinated programmes.

In another context, distributed leadership is also being discussed as relevant for the National Health Service. The NHS is by nature a highly complex and institutionalised system with a large and occupationally diverse workforce. The sector has taken a number of steps to devolve leadership and management functions away from board rooms and progressive tiers of management, into the offices of clinicians and primary care staff. There are relatively few managers (around 45,000) in the NHS, compared to over half a million professionally qualified staff.¹² Increased strain on the NHS, coupled with a need to improve the quality of patient care, have led to a rethink on how leadership can be distributed amongst frontline staff. The NHS leadership academy has developed a new leadership framework that represents a modification to the desired leadership model for the NHS, based on autonomy, accountability and shared responsibility. Although this is still largely a normative idea in the sector, an agenda has been set for the NHS to increase levels of staff engagement and team-building.¹³ To enable this kind of thinking across the sector, the Leadership Academy has developed a

¹⁰ See: Sharp, S., Lord, P., Handscomb, G., Macleod, S., Southcott, C., George, N., Jeffes, J., *Highly effective leadership in children's centres*, (2012).

¹¹ Sharp, S., Lord, P., Handscomb, G., Macleod, S., Southcott, C., George, N., Jeffes, J., *Highly effective leadership in children's centres*, (2012). p.8.

¹² NHS Confederation, 'Key statistics on the NHS', www.nhsconfed.org/priorities/political-engagement/Pages/NHS-statistics.aspx#staff

¹³ Story, J. Holti, R., *Towards a New Model of Leadership for the NHS*, (2013), p. 22.

feedback tool based upon the premises of distributed leadership, which invites practitioners to assess their personal leadership development needs.¹⁴

Distributed leadership has also been adopted in recent social movements aimed at health sector improvement. In 2013 the NHS embarked on the countrywide ‘Change Day’ event, a grassroots initiative aimed at mobilising collective action to improve the NHS and drive new innovative solutions to the challenges facing the organisation. Change Day was designed to have a low threshold for participation, encouraging action and input from frontline staff, and sought to gather pluralistic ideas for improvement rather than conformity to a central initiative. Change Day was fundamentally based on the idea that everyone has a valuable contribution to make, and thus aligns with the core principles of distributed leadership. The NHS still has a clearly hierarchical structure, driven by top-down accountability and performance targets. However, Change Day was designed to challenge this culture, and create opportunities for people throughout the NHS to take action without having to ask for permission. Of course, any transition to distributed models of leadership in the NHS will be gradual, and has some distance to travel, but it is interesting to note these examples of using distributed leadership concepts as a worthwhile principle in the sector.

Our sector interviews reinforced the view that distributed leadership can empower staff and help a company make better decisions, since leadership lies closer “to the coalface”. One expert interview identified the coffee shop Starbucks as a good example:

Starbucks has four levels of leadership. The bottom level is leadership of self, so they’re saying that leadership starts with every single person in every single coffee shop and it goes right up to the chief executive. They don’t say that it kicks in when you become a supervisor or a store manager or an area manager; everyone is collectively responsible to make the experience in every Starbucks outlet anywhere in the world excellent. It’s not a manager’s issue. It’s everybody’s issue. If you go into Starbucks you’ll notice change over the last few years. Staff will be engaged, the whole leadership of the company is engaged. Certainly, I’ve noticed a difference in the attitude in each of the stores and the level of empowerment and decision-making the coalface. Now there’s a real sense of ownership.

— Nigel Paine, MD nigelpaine.com

¹⁴See the Leadership Academy Website for more information : www.leadershipacademy.nhs.uk/discover/leadership-framework/leadership-framework-360-feedback-tool/ (website accessed 7 April 2014)



Shared leadership needs a shared purpose and vision

To an extent, distributing leadership beyond a senior leadership team implies a sharing of power that some senior leaders may at first find unusual, risky, or even threatening. There may be fears that newly empowered staff could pull in different directions, or towards goals that are not shared by the organisation. Therefore, time and again, the experts interviewed for this project emphasised that clarity of organisational purpose, vision and values becomes even more vital if leadership responsibilities are to become distributed. This clarity of purpose necessarily tends to come from those at the “top” of the organisation, and in practice this is a core responsibility for higher level leaders.

A discussion of a shared vision guiding action across an organisation was given by one HR expert interviewed for this project:

It's often the very top where the CEO will say, 'Well this is what our goal is for this year.' Then the director of each department will say, 'Well, what is it our department has to do to contribute to that goal?' ...So it trickled down from level to level and every single person within the organisation knows exactly how their individual contribution fits into the very top objective.

— Ksenia Zheltoukhova, Research Associate at CIPD

Perhaps a more profound way of thinking about distributed leadership is that this form of leadership actually may already exist, but is simply not recognised yet as *leadership*. Once one realises that leadership may take various forms and operate at various levels in an organisation, it may be appropriate, at least to celebrate this, but hopefully to encourage more of it.

Much leadership is hidden and not seen and the task is to find ways to make it visible and build on this capability. This is an essence of Eco-leadership (Western 2008/14), that leadership exists within the organisational eco-system everywhere. If you start looking for different kinds of leadership you'll begin to find it everywhere, for example in a teaching assistant, a middle manager, a canteen staff member.

— Simon Western, Director of Analytic-Network Coaching Ltd

The benefit of recognising leadership in new places is that organisations can self consciously seek to build on leadership skills and talent across the whole workforce, rather than focusing on a narrow cadre of leaders and future leaders.

So trusting people and giving them space to do things is a powerful development process. I don't believe in high potential leadership programmes. Talent is inclusive; everyone's got talent. It's just finding out what they're good at and then if they're prepared to exert themselves.

— Chris Bones, Manchester Business School

The notion of broadening leadership responsibility to include a greater number of staff has implications for continuing professional development programmes. Extending the reach of staff training programmes to incorporate basic ideas in leadership and management, constructive team-based working, negotiation, informal leadership and how to foster a culture of distributed leadership are all basic areas that can support this agenda.¹⁵

Organisations in the Education and Skills sector will no doubt recognise much of the thinking behind distributed leadership. The Education and Skills Sector faces many similar challenges to both the compulsory education and health sectors, including high levels of scrutiny, a strong focus on positive impacts and outcomes for individuals, and an increasingly tight financial climate. Training providers are increasingly expected to provide high rates of success and retention, and deliver good value for money. The cost of training has increasingly shifted away from centrally funded provision, placing more of the burden of cost upon the learner or employer accessing training. To manage in this environment, Education and Skills providers need individuals with strong account management skills, who are able to spot opportunities to develop business and engage confidently with clients without restriction. Using distributed models of leadership can provide a way of accommodating these challenges. Beyond the senior management team, many providers have tiers of responsibility through which individuals at many levels exert influence and responsibility. By more explicitly recognising the leadership aspect of these structures, providers could seek to maximise the subtle, distributed leadership that already exists within their organisations, and support this to grow even further.

¹⁵ Bennett, N., Wise, Christine., Woods, P., Harvey, J., *Distributed Leadership: A review of Literature*, (2003), p. 10.



03. Sharing leadership beyond an organisation

As well as distributing leadership across an organisation, it is also possible to extend leadership beyond the traditional boundaries of single organisations, to influence or support others in the wider market or sector. These ideas are particularly relevant where organisations have shared agendas and goals.

As an expression of collaborative approaches to leadership, leading beyond single organisations is increasingly being seen as relevant to a number of sectors. In this chapter we reflect on the approaches taken when operating beyond organisations, the formal approaches taken within systems leadership and how this type of leadership can be supported effectively.

The importance of leadership beyond one organisation

In the introduction to this report we discussed the range of factors that have changed how organisations operate, how the interconnectivity of organisations has increased and how outside influences have a greater impact. A key theme emerging from the literature and our interviews was the importance of leaders explicitly considering the systems in which they operate and how their organisation links to external influences. The metaphor of an organisation firstly as an ecosystem itself, but also as one that sits within a wider ecosystem of other organisations, was one used by one of our experts in an interview for this project:

We have to think about organisations as ecosystems within ecosystems. So the idea of an organisation, school, or college being a separate body is not reality anymore. It's linked to the wider education network and to the economy and the social changes going on around it. You have to think about your organisation beyond the barriers and walls of the college or the institution. Leaders have to think about all the stakeholders around it because they're influencing it, and also to think beyond stakeholders and realise what's going on in the local community and the global world.

— Simon Western, Director of Analytic-Network Coaching Ltd

Education and Skills is similar to other sectors in having a particularly complex mix of stakeholders, including staff, learners, communities, funders, sector representatives, and even competitors. It has long been seen as a key task for leaders in the sector to be communicating with these stakeholders, understanding or influencing their views, and representing their organisation.

I think the most successful leaders are the ones that have got their ears to the ground. Spending time talking to those in an operational role is really critical and making sure that you are aware of the key issues and what people are feeling.

— Jit Jethwa, Managing Director at i3 Consultancy

However, economic challenges, public sector funding reductions, but also changing views on how public services should be funded and delivered are prompting many organisations to review their approaches and seek a more collegiate approach to achieving objectives. In some publicly funded sectors, such as Children’s Services, there is a strong recognition that, beyond just representing and influencing other stakeholders, leaders must be able to actually play a leadership role to others well beyond only their own staff. One of our expert interviews explained how this was increasingly true in Children’s Services:

Because of the range of budget cuts across the board, across local authority and across all public services, Directors of Children’s Services are increasingly operating in an environment where they’re no longer only looking at leadership in a very direct way in their organisation, just leading their organisation, or leading their service. They’re looking at a lot more influencing and leading by influencing partner and other organisations. So instead of necessarily delivering a particular activity, a particular service through their child services department, very often they’re working with multiple organisations to ensure that outcomes are what they want them to be.

— A professional delivering leadership programmes for the children’s services sector

Systems leadership approaches

One example of providing leadership beyond one’s own organisation has been referred to as “systems leadership”. A recent research report for the organisation responsible for the professional development of principal and senior leaders working in the leadership, management and delivery of services for children, young people and families, defines systems leadership as:

leadership across organisational and geopolitical boundaries, beyond individual professional disciplines, within a range of organisational and stakeholder cultures, often without direct managerial control.¹⁶

A more formal expression of leading beyond one's own organisation can be found in the literature and practice around systems leadership in schools. To aid with the designation and supply of system leaders the Department for Education (DfE) has a section of their website dedicated to these roles. The DfE defines a system leader as:

[A] school leader with responsibility across more than one school, an executive head or interested in working beyond your school to support the wider system.

Systems leadership concepts are well developed in the English schools sector, and the National College for Teaching and Leadership has undertaken a body of work to encourage more formalised ways of sharing leadership resources across schools. This includes creating Teaching Schools, to pass on good practice in teaching to other schools, commissioning research and the creation of systems leader designations for staff working in schools, such as National Leaders of Education (NLE), Local Leaders of Education (LLE), and Specialist Leaders of Education (SLE). These roles formalise the activity of providing leadership outside a leader's immediate organisation, including through supporting other schools, as well as formally contributing to local and national developments in educational leadership. The types of support these leaders give depends on the needs of the schools they support, but can be linked to areas for improvement highlighted by Ofsted, supporting particular groups of students, or supporting other schools or departments to improve.

Leadership roles beyond the organisation are seen as good opportunities for professional development, as leaders experience different contexts and new challenges, while still being supported by their own organisations.

You learn leadership from practising leadership and therefore, what [school] alliances, federations and chains give you, is...the opportunity to practise. For example, partnership working between schools often entails senior leaders moving into another school to undertake a specific school improvement task or role. Their position then needs to be backfilled within the home school, so providing an opportunity for another member of the leadership team to step up and broaden their leadership experience. Or a middle leader might get the chance to be seconded

¹⁶ Lewis, J., Ghate, D., *Systems Leadership: Exceptional Leadership for exceptional times: Synthesis Paper*, (2013).

to another school for a term to act up in a more senior capacity or, for two days a week, to lead a department in a different school context.

— Robert Hill, independent education consultant

When organisations are formally paired together to share leadership, this can be for one school to draw on another’s expertise. However, it is regularly reported that both organisations receive benefits from sharing leadership. Sharing leadership also does not have to only be at the “top” of an organisation, but can happen at many levels, again using the principles of distributed leadership:

The mutual benefits of school-to-school partnerships are exemplified by a headteacher who was asked, ‘You’re a great headteacher, come and troubleshoot our organisation.’ She said, ‘I don’t work like that. I work by working out where leadership can be shown and encouraged throughout my organisation, and I’d like to model that.’ So she paired up the office staff, the support staff, at every level from both schools, and they worked together. It wasn’t a donor-recipient relationship; it was mutually beneficial.

— Dr Alison Fox, University of Leicester

Through adopting systems approaches schools have developed their leaders in different contexts and environments. Similar benefits may well be gained through sharing leadership approaches across Further Education and Skills providers, notwithstanding the fact that some providers are already large enough in themselves to benefit from scale in organising their leadership. One of the experts interviewed for this project discussed the fact that larger providers may be able to implement system leadership style approaches within their organisation, as well as linking to others.

Experiencing and understanding leadership in different contexts is a key element in leadership development. The ability to do that within chains and federations and, to a lesser extent, within teaching school alliances, is proving very powerful. These structures also provide ready-made leadership mentors who can help steer and guide emerging leaders. Now, FE colleges are big beasts and they can, therefore, move emerging leaders around internally across departments or across campuses, and so help to provide a spectrum of leadership challenges and opportunities. It’s about taking the principles of how system leadership is developing within and across schools and thinking about how they might be applied within an FE context.

— Robert Hill, independent education consultant

As well as “on the ground” links between organisations to support leadership and improvement, systems leadership responses can also seek to encourage leaders to take on leadership roles shaping how whole sectors develop, respond to challenges and drive change. The schools sector for example has an annual fellowship

programme, under which outstanding leaders are supported to meet with leading academics and policymakers to influence the latest thinking on key topical issues. This initiative has seen benefits for the leaders themselves, and has influenced national debates on schools.

One of our expert interviews highlighted the importance of considering how a sector's reputation is perceived by external stakeholders, and saw this in particular as an area that leaders from the Education and Skills sector could consider as a joint challenge which could benefit from a collaborative approach.

Leadership in the FE sector needs to be much better at communicating outside the sector what it's done and its successes. I think that there is a leadership of the sector challenge, which needs to be addressed quite urgently, because I think if you're an individual leader and you're part of a confident and coherent sector, it is actually much easier to push on with what you're trying to do.

— Chris Bones, Manchester Business School

Supporting leadership across organisations

The obvious challenge in creating systems leadership approaches across several peer organisations is the possibility of competition, which can undermine attempts at collaboration. The dynamics of competition and collaboration vary across sectors and, even within the Education and Skills sector they have changed over time. There have been and remain various vehicles through which organisations in the Education and Skills sector do collaborate, but success has varied by geography, subject and organisation, and collaboration between rivals remains challenging. As with distributing leadership within organisations, the aim would be to discover common ground and areas of mutual benefit, or to produce appropriate forums, and potentially neutral brokers, through which collaboration can function. One of our expert interviews highlighted the potential of identifying specific common challenges that can form a focus for collaborative leadership:

There are very good strategies to help people build that shared understanding and as soon as you've done that you have a shared issue. Once you have a shared issue, it means you've actually then got agreement about what it is you're trying to fix, and when you've got that agreement you can start fixing it.

— Chris Bones, Manchester Business School

Before leaders can step outside their organisation to support other organisations or wider sector objectives, they must be confident that their own projects will not

suffer through their absence. Creating capacity within an organisation can be necessary, with sufficient staff to cover the core leadership functions of the organisation itself, as well as systems leadership functions. This can also give additional staff the opportunity to show leadership within their own organisation, for example, by temporarily filling the role of a colleague who has taken on systems leadership responsibilities.

If those providing your basic services are not well supported and are not, therefore, able to deliver a quality service, then your leadership activities outside that organisation and more complex leadership activities that you're having to develop in working partnerships and influencing are going to be almost pointless. They're just going to be things that are very pretty and essentially other organisations benefit from.

— A professional delivering leadership programmes for the children's services sector

As part of a review into systems leadership, Ghate interviewed 29 systems leaders across children's services and found that there were six activities that support the development of systems leaders in the Children's Services sector:

- There is a limit to what can be trained or learnt and that efforts should be focused on developing the right mind set.
- The best way to develop is through experiential learning, through doing or shadowing.
- It is important to have the opportunity for experimentation and then reflect on why new approaches did or did not work.
- There was recognition that this is new territory for many leaders and that they needed to develop confidence in working with uncertainty, taking risks and ceding ground.
- Theory was seen as important and systems leaders valued exposure to leading theoretical thinkers.
- Learning and training alongside peers in group development programmes was seen as a good way of creating a group of leaders with common language, experiences and network to make systemic change.¹⁷

These areas of development were also highlighted through our expert interviews as good development activities that support leaders in a range of contexts and situations. A number of the experts also built on the importance of reflection by highlighting the benefits of networking and communicating with leaders from their own or other sectors to reflect on leadership challenges and approaches. One approach to aid with this is through coaching.

¹⁷ Lewis, J., Ghate, D., *Systems Leadership: Exceptional Leadership for Exceptional Times, Source Paper 2*, (2013).

Getting somebody to coach you who is external, so they don't know the ins and outs, is a good sounding board to run ideas past, where you can talk openly about how you're feeling, which you probably wouldn't do with people internal to your organisation, even your peers sometimes.

— Anne Marshall, Director at Target HR Delivery

However, a number of experts also highlighted other methods of creating opportunities for reflection such as co-counselling or mentoring.

You need to give leaders somewhere secure and independent of their reporting lines where they can talk through problems. One solution is...where you get leaders from different sectors offering co-counselling sessions where each leader talks about a problem they have and everybody else chips in and says, 'Well what about this, what about that?' This is actually quite an interesting experience, because what you get is being listened to and an articulation of the problem that actually helps you solve it and sometimes you get ideas from others. Something a bit more formal like mentoring can also be effective, but only where the leader chooses the mentor.

— Chris Bones, Manchester Business School

There are numerous ways in which leadership beyond one organisation can be interpreted, whether formal or informal, but also a range of benefits both to individuals and organisations of taking a more collaborative approach to leadership. Therefore, it will be useful for the Education and Skills sector to consider the extent to which they are already leading beyond their own organisations, and whether an extension, greater formalisation, or even simply celebration of this activity would be valuable for the sector.

04. The importance of context to leadership

The collaborative approaches discussed in the previous sections can bring significant benefits for organisations. At the same time, understanding the context within which an organisation and its leaders are operating is a crucial success factor, especially given the increasing complexity leaders face.

The previous chapters have given examples of how collaborative approaches to leadership are being discussed outside the Education and Skills sector to support organisations to respond to complex, multi-stakeholder environments. Another key theme that emerged from our desk research and interviews has been the importance of context to leadership. This includes both understanding and interpreting the context in which a leader and their organisation are operating, but also how then to act on that appropriately. This chapter gives a brief overview of the discussions on the importance of context, before going on to consider a view from one contributor to the report in particular who reminds us that, regardless of context, simple steps in leadership can still be applied.

Leaders in all sectors need to be aware of the context of their organisation, its operating environment and objectives in order to inform their approaches to leadership. In the modern business world, public sector, and in the Education and Skills sector, increasing complexity is leading to an increasing need for leaders to consciously detect, reflect on, and act on, their contexts. Once they are aware of their context they can build meaningful initiatives that resonate with those they lead to produce successful outcomes. All that said, while context is key, there are many environments, organisations and sectors, which share common issues and challenges, and shared contexts. The basic concept that the context affects approaches to leadership was shared by most of the experts we interviewed:

Leadership is contextual. So, leadership in a steel mill is different from leadership in a music company. Context really matters.

— Gareth Jones, London Business School

Situational approaches to leadership

The importance of adapting leadership styles to the different challenges leaders face has been discussed in a body of literature stretching back over decades. One aspect of this discussion is informed by historic work on “situational” theories of leadership. These theories generally focus on how an individual or organisation can adapt their leadership style or approach to meet situationally contingent needs, and hence “a range of styles will need to be employed in order to be effective across a range of situations.”¹⁸ These situational theories successfully addressed the criticism levelled at trait-based theories of leadership which were overly simplistic and which prescribed a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to leadership development. In contrast, situational theories recognise that different approaches (leadership styles) are more or less suited to various specific contexts. As a result, situational theories tend to involve a diagnostic stage which enables contextual characteristics/properties to be established. The characteristics that each theory measures vary, as do the range of leadership styles they prescribe, but include considering factors, such as the nature and capability of one’s followers, the objectives and tasks required, and the behaviour types of an appropriate leadership response.¹⁹

One of many examples of situational discussions to leadership is the work of John Adair (1973). Adair’s theory was developed whilst he lectured at Sandhurst Royal Military Academy and is founded on three core management responsibilities that constitute the leadership context: achieving the task; managing the team; and managing individuals. Adair’s theory simply proposes that effective leadership gives greater or lesser attention to each of these three areas depending on the situation.

“The 3 circles are forever changing in size, depending on the situation, every minute of every hour, of every hour of every day.”

— (Adair, 2005, p. 10)

Situational theories of leadership, including action-centred and contingency leadership, are context-specific and focus on adapting leadership styles to a specific problem or set of circumstances, taking into account the nature of what needs to be achieved and the team and resources available. These theories recognise that

¹⁸ White, M., ‘Leadership’, *Educational Leadership, Technologies of Leadership, and Feeling Valued – A Review of the Literatures*, (2009), p. 9

¹⁹ See for example, Hershey, P. & Blanchard, K.H., ‘Life Cycle Theory of Leadership’, *Training and Development Journal*, (1969), 23(5): 26–34 and Fiedler, F., ‘A contingency model of leadership effectiveness’. In: Berkowitz, L., (ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*, (1964), pp. 149–190.

effective leadership does not rely on structures alone, and that a leader, or leadership approach, may need to be adaptable. As discussed earlier in the section, being able to detect or sense context, and develop an appropriate leadership response, is therefore an important skill for leaders.

The importance of context

While situational discussions of leadership give valuable insights into how an individual or organisation must adapt to fit their situation, the challenge to this in the modern business and public sector operating environment is the core level of complexity that leaders must deal with. It can be very difficult to make sense of and react to an operating environment in which there are multiple stakeholders, clients, competitors and partners. One article on contextual leadership suggests that “contextual leaders” as people able to do the following:

- Recognise and understand the culture of the organisation and its people,
- Use their attributes and apply their experience and competencies in an enlightened and effective manner to achieve positive results for the organisation, its people and its stakeholders
- Not just blindly do what may have worked for them before in some other context!²⁰

The majority of contributors we interviewed highlighted the importance of context within leadership. This necessarily differs from one sector or organisation to another, but there are also examples of vastly different contexts within organisations. For example, one contributor from the automotive industry described the differences between the leadership styles required in parts of the organisation that were office based, and those that were plant based. Another interviewee, from the private school sector, made a similar point:

Understanding the context in which you are working is critical, and I would say that really good leaders are able to, and do, adapt their leadership style according to the context in which they find themselves.

— A professional delivering leadership programmes in the independent schools sector

Adaptation to specifics of your context also applies to implementing leadership initiatives or development programmes, or drawing on leadership practice that may have been successful in one sphere, but may not necessarily translate in a new context:

²⁰ A. C. (Dean) Macris, ‘Contextual Leadership’, in *Update*, Vol iv, Issue 01-06, (2006), p.2.



You really need understanding of the business's context and its challenges. Many times I've seen people just try and helicopter in something that's worked in other organisations, in their context, and then just try to replicate in a business, and it fails.

— An HR professional within an large insurance organisation

One of our leadership expert interviews also described how important it is to contextualise any attempts to improve leadership:

Contextualise the challenge. The real problem in leadership programmes is they can only ever really appeal to the intellect and everybody gets it and goes home and doesn't change. Actually when you're getting into a real business problem with your team and you bring someone in to work it through with you and you get the sense of 'actually here are a couple of tools that are really useful in this context.'

— Chris Bones, Manchester Business School

Building on these points, another expert emphasised the importance of practice, as opposed to theory, alongside context in implementing leadership change.

Context is obviously important. There's no kind of theoretical model that just works without any kind of contextual underpinning, and also leadership is nothing if it's not about behaviour change. One of the frustrations in my life is watching probably billions but certainly millions of pounds or dollars go down the plug because leadership is taught out of context, often out of the workplace, and people go back into the workplace and never have a chance to change their behaviour, or if they try, they are slapped back down and the result is kind of zero impact. Three weeks after a programme that costs a fortune, people are doing exactly what they did before or making only very, very minor changes, whereas to me the essence of leadership development is about behaviour change. It's about doing stuff differently, not thinking about things or intellectually grasping something, but doing.

— Nigel Paine, MD nigelpaine.com

Another of the experts we interviewed likened this distinction between theory and practice of leadership to becoming a better tennis player:

It's a bit like the difference between reading a book about how to play tennis and playing tennis. In the end you become a better tennis player by going out and hitting a few balls. Now, that's not to say that reading the book about how to play tennis wouldn't help you, but that may be a necessary but insufficient condition.

— Gareth Jones, London Business School

Sensing and using context in increasing complexity

Recognising the importance of context, does not necessarily make sensing context, understanding and reacting to it any easier. In order to adapt to different contexts, another interviewee emphasised the importance of context reading and context sensing, to guide leadership approaches:

Leaders must be very good at reading context...at situation sensing. So, they're good at walking into the office and saying, 'Morale's a bit down; why?' Or, another office and saying, 'It's flying here in the marketing department; what's going on?' So, what follows from leadership being contextual is that leaders have to be good at reading context.

— Gareth Jones, London Business School

Context sensing skills can be developed and there are basic things that leaders can do to improve their awareness of context. One simple solution for sensing context within a leader's own organisation is by creating informal ways of communicating with members of staff instead of relying purely on traditional or rigid communication routes. More direct and informal communication can guard against information being filtered or sanitised as it passes up through an organisation. An interesting discussion of how this can be done was given by one expert interviewee:

I was working with a partner of a large professional services firm. A very highly thought of partner, experienced and so on. We went through some 360 degree feedback, which, frankly, for a man of his stature was rather disappointing. He was really upset and hit hard. So, after we had finished he said, 'Listen, I'm really concerned about this. Will you come and visit me at my workplace?' So I went to visit him and he had about 30 partners working for him, in an open plan office with his office at the front. Like most partners in the big firms, he's a bit of a workaholic. So he walked into the space, dived into his office, turned his PC on, and that's what he did all day, worked on his PC. I said, 'OK, this is really easy to solve,' and all I did was move his office from one end of the open space to the other, so that as he came in in the morning he had to walk past and say, 'Hi, Glen, how's the higher education project going?' 'Hi, Oliver, did we get the FMCG gig?' You know, he had to talk to people. Well, six months later we re-tested it and his data was much, much better.

— Gareth Jones London Business School

Another of our interviewees, from the automotive sector, explained how shadowing opportunities help leaders and aspiring leaders in a very large firm to gain a greater understanding of the business, and the operating challenges it faces, and potential personal or career development opportunities:

People have informal shadowing opportunities to go and look at other parts of the business, which gives great practical experiences and also a sense of what careers are out there.

— An HR professional within an automotive manufacturer

It may also be appropriate for leaders to use specific tools or frameworks to seek a greater understanding and insight into their context. Frameworks that encourage reflection on the core components of an organisation's work – its resources, people, objectives, political and environmental context – are being developed, and can be drawn on to aid the context sensing and interpreting process. Sensing and responding to external context is often far more challenging than internal organisational context, and may require specific commissioning of research, monitoring of policy, data and key indicators, or simply being visible in the sector and communicating with external colleagues and influencers.

Once a context is understood, an appropriate leadership response can then be implemented, depending on the needs that are presented. Often this can happen naturally, almost instinctively, once a context is understood more fully. Other times, a more self-conscious, intentional response to a context may be needed, for example through planning or strategy sessions that carefully consider the organisation's objectives, resources and context.

Clearly, both sensing context and responding to it are vital for organisations in the Education and Skills sector. The organisations themselves and the operating context is complex and changing. Trends in society, pedagogy, technology and the economy, combine with policy and funding, and organisations' competitive position in the Education and Skills landscape to produce key challenges for leaders in setting the strategic and practical direction for their organisations. Many organisations in the sector have teams that monitor and respond to key trends that affect their business, and building reliable systems for this can be an important tool in responding to complexity. How then to respond to these changing and challenging contexts is an altogether more difficult and subtle task, and arguably the primary challenge for leaders in the sector.

Leadership plain and simple

Although context was seen as important by most observers, a number of them tempered this by raising the concept that there were many commonalities that exist within leadership that are not context specific.

The work we produce impacts on how things are organised, and the mindsets and culture of the employees. If you're producing education, or you're producing tractors, it does affect things differently, but there are very similar problems and challenges in all these different sectors, which are shared.

— Simon Western, Director of Analytic-Network Coaching Ltd

One of the experts we interviewed for this report went further than this and heavily emphasised the importance of not losing sight of the fundamental principles of leadership. Steve Radcliffe's views on leadership, outlined in his book, *Leadership Plain and Simple*, are that, whatever the context, certain key principles apply, which can set leadership off on the right footing.

Rather than exploring every theory known to mankind, please distil down into something relatively simple and straightforward, which anybody can come along and go, 'Yes, oh, I get that.'

— Steve Radcliffe, author of *Leadership Plain and Simple*

Steve Radcliffe explained in our interview that there are “only three jobs to be done in leadership”, namely setting the ambition or aspiration for the future, engaging people to come with you, and delivering and executing on this plan. Radcliffe emphasises the importance of vision, relationship building and achieving goals, viewing leadership as “a job to do”, rather than as a trait or behaviour that is exhibited by individuals. In his interview, Steve Radcliffe gave an example of a senior HR staff member from a large retail company who also did not believe in competencies, traits or behaviours as the primary needs of leadership; instead, his organisation's approach was as follows:

He says, 'We help people get in touch with what they care about and what they want to make happen, and then we support them in that.' So he completely took off the table all these factors the leadership industry and their organisations can introduce, to communicate one way or another, either 'you're not a leader,' or 'leadership's complicated, so you won't really get it,' or 'you're not a very good leader because we've scored you on this bar chart.'

— Steve Radcliffe, author of *Leadership Plain and Simple*

Of course, in order to set a coherent vision for the future, engage people to come with you, and deliver on your plans, you must have an excellent sense of what you want to achieve and the organisation's operating context. So context remains important. However, it is useful to remember that leadership is about achieving organisational objectives, rather than necessarily marking up evidence of competencies and behaviours.

Sector leadership strategies need to retain enough flexibility to enable adaptability within and across organisations, to respond to different challenges and workforces. By using a “plain and simple” approach to leadership, this kind of flexibility could be supported, while maintaining a simplicity of objectives and approach that can support a clarity of purpose for both leaders and followers.

05. Conclusions

Collaboration and understanding of context are becoming increasingly important and relevant for the Education and Skills sector. In this section we discuss how these trends might be synthesised for the sector's benefit, in order to respond to the inherent complexity the sector faces.

We have seen how the broad banner of collaborative approaches to leadership, and the importance of understanding and interpreting context, have become increasingly important to the world of business and public sector delivery. This is not a case of theory leading practice, but largely the other way around: practice around collaborative approaches has been developing in many spheres as leaders recognise the core value of inclusivity and collaboration to achieving objectives in a modern workplace. If anything, theoretical descriptions from the literature, describing these trends, are rather minimal and tend to focus only on certain sectors. Equally, strong tools for supporting collaboration and context sensing are in limited supply for leaders, in comparison to more individualised, or competency based approaches to leadership development.

We suggest that the Education and Skills sector has a particular need for collaborative and context specific approaches to leadership. The sector by its nature is one of multiple actors, interest groups and stakeholders. As well as providers themselves, and their staff, there is an overarching funding agency, sector representative bodies, and government itself as the key driver of policy and funding context. Equally, training providers have core obligations to their learners, employers and often to their wider communities, whose interests and well-being must be considered as a core mission. The “product” that the Education and Skills sector is dealing in – essentially, learning, skills and personal development – is subtle and difficult to define, even with the use of proxies in the form of qualifications. These features go significantly beyond the simpler more easily defined products existing in many other sectors. The Education and Skills sector already has a good story to tell on pioneering collaborative approaches to leadership, as evidenced by the collaborative forums that already exist in the sector, and the collective approach to representing sector interests to government. At the same time, some practice in the sector could benefit from a renewed focus

encouraging greater moves towards collaborative approaches, and away from more traditional top-down, command and control approaches.

In this report we have given a brief overview of some expressions of emerging leadership trends from beyond the Education and Skills sector. There is a need to take the best of these approaches and synthesise an appropriate format for this to be expressed in the Education and Skills sector. This would need a wider dialogue, potentially drawing on the Leadership Conversation work that is being conducted in the sector, to explore how this synthesis might be achieved in practice.

One example of a synthesis approach to these emerging discourses is the work of Simon Western on Eco-Leadership.²¹ Western calls for a new leadership paradigm to meet the needs of contemporary organisations situated in today’s networked society, to better reflect the context and challenges facing leaders. The term Eco-Leadership reflects the growing use of environmental and network metaphors in leadership literature. Western discusses conceiving organisations “as ecosystems and networks, rather than closed systems”, with organisations rethought as “ecosystems within ecosystems”.²² Arguably, by changing the metaphors we use to think about leadership, moving away from machine-based metaphors toward ecosystem metaphors, for example, we can conceive of and respond to modern leadership challenges more effectively.

When we interviewed Simon Western for this project, he described the importance of interpreting collaboration in organisations as more than just “being nice to each other”:

Collaboration actually means working through tension. Leaders need to create enough trust that encourages people to speak truth to power. Essentially people need to know that you’re not going to get fired or pressured for speaking out. One of the biggest problems I see in all the organisations I work in is conformity.

— Simon Western, Director of Analytic-Network Coaching Ltd

Whatever synthesis of leadership ideas and support that is developed for the Education and Skills sector, no doubt factors beyond just collaboration and context will need to be included. One area that this report has not focused on is the ethical dimension of leadership, which is outlined as a core part of Eco-Leadership. Ethical

²¹ See Simon Western, *Leadership, a critical text*, (2008).

²² Western, *Leadership*, p.244.

behaviour is relevant across all sectors, but perhaps particularly so in the Education and Skills sector, which was recognised by other contributors we interviewed:

It's absolutely essential to have some work done on what constitutes appropriate moral behaviour in leadership...because as we move into periods of economic constraint, there is tension between collaboration and competition, then a moral perspective becomes really vital in terms of leadership development.

— John West-Burnham, Professor of Educational Leadership, St Mary's University

What exactly all the findings of this report mean for a leadership discourse in the Education and Skills sector remains to be developed, but we argue that it is clear that new ways of viewing leadership and how it responds to complexity should be a key priority for the sector's leaders. The Education and Skills sector should take the best and most relevant of different available concepts on leadership and forge their own bespoke conception that fits the needs and realities of the sector. We strongly believe this should include provision for collaborative approaches to leadership, effectively distribute leadership, and to sensing and interpreting context, as well as other areas, such as ethical behaviour. Another of our interviewees explained how a patchwork of approaches can produce the best response for a given context:

Everybody knows that organisations fail because of poor leadership and succeed because of good leadership, so it's crucial. And there's no one model or one organisation or one approach; lots of things work. One of my basic philosophies is that there are different models that can be applied and you should be building something that is a patchwork of different approaches, different resources, different ways of operating, rather than, say, there's this brilliant solution in this one little box and that's what we're going to do - because it will never be 100% successful.

— Nigel Paine, MD nigelpaine.com

Through this process it is also crucial to keep sight of and build on the things that make the Education and Skills sector distinctive and successful. Its diversity, its focus on learner interests, its community ethos, its core links to supporting the economy's need for skills, and many other strengths will inform the approach and attitude to leadership. Articulating a common sense of what is important for the sector, and for its leadership, as the Education and Training Foundation is aiming to do, will be an invaluable step in taking collective steps to support leadership development in the sector. This point was well made by one of the experts we interviewed:

I think in the education sector, the thing to do is to recognise that you're in the business of potentially transforming people's lives, and be excited about it.

— Gareth Jones, London Business School

This report has only been a starting point to begin to raise discussions about emerging ways of tackling leadership in the 21st century. How the ideas in the report might integrate in the Education and Skills sector remains to be seen. It will be interesting to discuss the issues raised in this report with leaders in the Education and Skills sector and understand where they agree or disagree with points made. Where agreement is found, it will also be valuable to understand the positive measures already being taken in the sector towards some of the ideals or models discussed in the report, and potentially what Education and Skills can teach others in the public and private sectors about good practice in these areas. Practically, there is a challenge to determine and communicate how better collaboration and context sensing can be achieved for the sector and what tools or other support may need to be provided.

As we have argued in the report, there are great challenges facing leaders in the Education and Skills sector, but also great prizes to be won, and the sector's goals of supporting people to develop their skills and careers are crucial for our national success, not to mention the life chances of individual learners. By making best use of leadership trends from beyond the sector, combined with the excellent practice already found in Education and Skills, the sector will continue both to exercise excellent leadership, but also to show the quality and adaptability that will support it, and its learners, into the future.

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