

Evaluating leadership impact: a capacity-building model

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Many of the Leadership Foundation's open programmes provide experiential learning over short intensive periods. Programmes such as Senior Strategic Leadership and Head of Department frequently leave participants wishing they could recapture the sense of engagement experienced during the programmes. In particular, they miss the sense of collaborative working and networking which is typically established during a pair of two-day residential modules.

Impact studies of some of the programmes demonstrated that participants often find it more difficult than expected to implement and sustain changes which they had planned during the residential course. Furthermore, they are not always well equipped to monitor and evaluate the ongoing impact of their leadership on their colleagues and the organisational units which they manage.

There was clearly an opportunity to address some of these perceived needs through devising an event, and supporting materials, which were intended to re-engage higher education leaders as practitioners interested in improving the impact of their work.

The account presented here is likely to interest both individual leaders who conceive of themselves as belonging to a growing professional leadership community in higher education, and also staff development practitioners with an interest in enhancing and sustaining the benefits of leadership development interventions – their own, or those provided by the Leadership Foundation.

The toolkit, which was used at a pilot event in July 2009, is described and demonstrated here, along with responses by those who have used it in their own practice since returning to their institutions.

Background: the problem of not planning for impact

This article tells the story of an attempt to work with voluntary participants from a range of higher education institutions (HEIs) in order to strengthen, at an organisational level, the impact gained from participation by middle and senior managers in the Leadership Foundation's open programmes. These include the Senior Strategic Leadership (SSL), Preparing for Senior Strategic Leadership (PSSL) and Head of Department (HOD) programmes.

An internal Leadership Foundation study (2008) found that very few senior leaders shared their planned actions with colleagues when they returned from programmes. Indeed, many participants felt a sense of embarrassment at having taken part in the programme, due to fears of being associated with activity which might be seen as being either costly or elitist. Only one of 19 interviewees reported having been supported on their return by the HR functions in their university. Many of the remainder said they didn't think their HR

people knew that they had taken part in the programme in the first place.

Another finding from the survey was that programme alumni felt disappointed not to have been engaged subsequently by the Leadership Foundation in any process of ongoing development. In the words of one respondent, "It's almost as if you've done the programme and you've been forgotten."

It was therefore clear that there was a lost opportunity – **in not preparing participants on programmes to be able to monitor and evaluate the impact of their own leadership on those around them**, the impact of the programmes themselves might be weakened. At the same time, it could also be argued that the **opportunity for participants to continue to engage with one another and with the Leadership Foundation** was not provided as proactively as could have been the case.

In order to increase the impact - and awareness of such impact - of the Leadership Foundation's programmes on individual participants and their institutions, a **toolkit** was designed with the aim of building experience in practitioner-led impact evaluation amongst selected alumni from the SSL, PSSL and HOD programmes. A total of 15 people took part in a 24-hour event aimed at trialling the set of diagnostic instruments and facilitative activities in the toolkit.

By aiming to select at least one institution per country or English region to take part in the trial event, there was recognition of the potential for expanding into a sustainable UK-wide network, or community of practice (Wenger, 1998), of leadership practitioners interested in inquiring into and enhancing their own practice.

Rationale for the toolkit

Research on the impact of leadership development on participants has shown that realising intended change in the wake of intensive training programmes is unrelated to the degree of satisfaction which participants ascribe to the programmes. The most critical factor lies in the extent to which participants are supported in following up their programmes through engaging collaboratively with those they lead.

An internal Leadership Foundation study (2008) found that very few senior leaders shared their planned actions with colleagues when they returned from programmes. And it could be argued (Baume, 2008) that the impact of evaluation can only fully be realised if processes of monitoring and evaluation are planned and made explicit at the same time as a developmental programme is being planned.

To this end the Evaluating Leadership Impact toolkit was created, to support participants not only in Leadership Foundation programmes but also in the wider sector.

EVALUATING LEADERSHIP IMPACT: A CAPACITY-BUILDING MODEL

It is argued that strategic leaders are likely to display and model particular characteristics, including personal and professional networking and high-quality personal and interpersonal skills which apply emotional intelligence. The basis for developing these skills and characteristics is to build on self-understanding of management and communication styles, strengths and areas for development, in order to create and nurture working environments in which genuine collaboration is seen as a desired norm.

ILERN (2007) defines three idealised types of leadership which are not mutually exclusive - all overlap, but with distinctive characteristics. The three types are democratic leadership, facilitative leadership and distributed leadership. The toolkit is likely to assist in the development of all three leadership types, but focuses mainly on the areas of overlap between them:

- | Interaction;
- | Learning;
- | Communication.

The toolkit places considerable emphasis on developing **facilitation** and **evaluation** capacities at local level within universities, in order to bring about a sustainable change which is widely owned by participating professionals.

Such change requires a collaborative approach, and one in which 'strategic conversations' (NCSL, 2005a) are vital. These conversations are about negotiating an agreed language to help practitioners examine what they do. Specifically, this language enables participants to:

- | Learn about each others' work;
- | Build collaborative capabilities;
- | Learn how to inquire;
- | Learn how to reflect;
- | Learn how to bring about action related to desired change;
- | Learn how to evaluate each others' work and its impact.

The toolkit aims to ensure that its users are equipped not only to help colleagues develop appropriate competence in participation/learning, but also to become attentive to the indicators that communities of practice are forming.

The toolkit

The tools themselves have been adapted to suit the context of higher education institutions from a range of publicly available sources, including those offered by agencies in other fields of education, such as school-based settings.

All are designed to raise awareness of team/organisational climates among groups of colleagues (or 'professional learning communities'), or to **facilitate collaborative dialogue** so that it becomes a natural part of group-working processes.

The contents list of the toolkit, shown below, gives a flavour of the range of activities:

- Tool 1:** Collaborative working survey
- Tool 2:** Impact assessment grids
- Tool 3:** Preparing for writing accounts of practice

- Tool 4:** Progress chart
- Tool 5:** Prioritisation matrix – impact and team engagement
- Tool 6:** Simple summative evaluation format
- Tool 7:** Project leadership 'diamond 9' culture card slot
- Tool 8:** How well is the project team learning?
- Tool 9:** Force field analysis
- Tool 10:** Focus groups
- Tool 11:** Fishbowl discussion
- Tool 12:** Photo evaluation
- Tool 13:** Staff outputs

Designing the trial

The Leaders as Engaged Practitioners trial was designed in order to meet both individual and organisational needs. In terms of the latter, a number of anticipated benefits were identified:

- | **Institutional learning** - self-awareness and reflexivity, in support of institutions becoming stronger as learning organisations;
- | **Institutional capacity-building** - institutions taking more responsibility for a critical approach to developing leadership, in partnership with the Leadership Foundation.

For individuals, the desired outcomes of their involvement in the trial in the longer term were:

- | That leaders with whom the participant has worked would adopt an evidence-based approach to leading and implementing change;
- | That leaders would feel the motivation to contribute their own findings and experience to a bank of practice which has informed, and been informed by, approaches to evaluating the impact of leadership development activity.

This could involve:

- | Working with colleagues in their institution to establish baselines and success criteria for team capability and working climate, and for performance indicators relating to impact on relevant stakeholders;
- | Promoting the use of tools which support evidence-gathering and analysis (including reflective learning logs, action planning templates, diagnostic tools);
- | Seeking out good practice in leadership development, across their own institution;
- | Seeking regular opportunities to support practitioners to gather evidence, and to be explicit with others about what they are doing, in order to build evaluative capacity more widely in their organisations;
- | Sharing with other participants the learning from their own projects through an action learning set;
- | Producing materials and contributing to Leadership Foundation programme virtual learning environments, so that others can build effective practice in evaluating leadership development impact.

The role played by action learning

One of the practical aims of the trial was to make it more feasible to capture the learning which derives from informal dialogue between practitioners, with a view to making it explicit and consciously self-aware as a learning conversation. This builds on the notion that informal dialogue can be strengthened when it is facilitated within a framework of action learning and coaching.

A particular emphasis was placed on action learning. This has been identified as a powerful tool, because it:

- | Enables distributed leadership;
 - | Facilitates collective leadership capacity;
 - | Develops and enhances reflective practice;
 - | Wins commitment from participants to wider organisational change and learning;
 - | Catalyses teamworking;
 - | Sustains organisational capability and culture.
- (Gentle, 2010, forthcoming)

The collaborative learning which participants in an action learning set experience is usually very different from other forms of dialogue with which they might be more familiar. The effect can seem almost magical.

In practice, an action learning set session could contain six members (one facilitator and five presenters) and last for around two hours. An agenda might contain:

1. Set opening
2. Presentation and analysis of issues (15 minutes per presenter)
3. Drafting and suggestion of action plans
4. Review of the process of the set meeting handled as a round

Each presenter takes a maximum of three minutes to outline their own project, ending with a key question about an issue they would like to learn more from – for example how to overcome a barrier, understand underlying reasons etc. The remaining time is used for challenging and clarifying questions in an atmosphere of trust, confidentiality and support. Other participants resist the temptation to make suggestions. Ideas for action to be worked on by each presenter/problem owner are put forward during stage 3.

The trial event

Volunteers from 15 institutions took part in a 24-hour residential developmental event, designed to introduce them to evaluation methodology and to the range of tools available for use in their own contexts. The 'mix' of participants included four professional services leaders, nine academic leaders such as deans and heads of department, and two learning and development specialists.

By the end of the trial event, it was expected that each participant would have:

- | Identified and made use of a set of tools for impact evaluation which had been enabled through the Leadership Foundation;
- | Established baselines against which to measure the impact of leadership development activity at individual, team and institutional* levels.

The programme made use of action learning methodology, and aimed to establish the participants as a team. In addition to working with the toolkit itself, a session was also included on the value of bringing an 'appreciative inquiry' approach to evaluation and to planning for change.

Toolkit demonstration

The approach used to demonstrate the tools involved dividing the participants into groups of three or four, and asking each to choose two of the tools to demonstrate to another small group. This clearly involved understanding how the tool worked, then adapting it and preparing to facilitate its use. The experience of using the tools in this way led to much reflection and feedback.

In evaluating the event, 100% of participants rated the toolkit and its demonstration session as excellent or good:

"It has provoked me to consider some new approaches I had not previously considered."

"Of immediate usefulness- very clear."

"The toolkit is a fantastic extension to my leadership skills and will definitely lead to the development of my team as a more effective and supportive unit."

"It gave me some good ideas that I intend to use soon with my team."

Evaluation

"The event surpassed my expectations. The unique blend of active exploration of practical leadership tools combined with critical discussion amongst colleagues experiencing similar challenges from different backgrounds was transformational. I plan to put my learning to immediate use."

However, there were some constraints in the 24-hour structure of the event, meaning that some participants felt that they would have liked more direct experience of the tools themselves.

Asking leaders themselves to be reflective practitioners and take responsibility for evaluation of the impact of their own leadership was welcomed, but some participants also felt that their institutions' HR services could perhaps do more to support processes of gauging and strengthening impact:

"As a staff developer, I was delighted to have been part of the first group engaging leaders from the Leadership Foundation leadership programmes in evaluating the impact of their development. It would be good if staff developers could work alongside the Leadership Foundation with this programme to help to embed the approach into HEIs."

There was clearly potential for building on the event to create a community of practice, and to expand this community through offering a similar event to greater numbers of participants in future.

* 'institutional' is used here to denote a wider organisational grouping, but need not necessarily refer to an entire HEI. Some participants may have preferred to confine their activities to a narrower organisational unit, such as a faculty or department.

After the event

Before leaving the event, around half of the participants agreed to continue to engage with one another via an action learning set, which has committed to meeting regularly. With ongoing support from Leadership Foundation staff, it may be possible to build on this sense of commitment in order to strengthen the notion of a community of practice with a specific focus on impact.

Participants were asked in the four-month period following the event if they could report on their use of the tools in their practice. Two responses were given - while these were the only responses received, several other participants commented on their intention to use the toolkit in coming months, although they reported other, more urgent demands from within their institutions which put pressure on their time to innovate and reflect.

Participant 1:

"As I am in learning and development, I've looked at how we might use the toolkit more widely to evaluate the impact of the work that we do within the university. So I have introduced the toolkit to my team and we'll be using it as follows:

- As part of our leadership and management development series to engage the participants in evaluating the impact of their own learning as leaders/managers on their performance and that of their team etc.;
- Generally to use to measure the impact of our work – following up on participants to find out how they have used the learning and what difference it has made. The toolkit has provided us with different ways to capture that information;
- Also to provide us with some good impact evaluation stories to use in our marketing of our work."

"As an example, when introducing the toolkit to my team I started with the familiar problem-solving tool - force field analysis. Whilst they could see how it could be used in its familiar form they had difficulties in seeing how we could use it to evaluate learning and impact. So I talked them through examples and the light went on! Only time will tell how they will use it and what we'll get out of it."

Participant 2:

"In terms of the tools I must confess I have not been able to use them as fully as I would have liked, mainly due to the fact that we are under a major period of restructuring which is causing a lot of angst and uncertainty and many changes to current team and collaborative groups. The one tool I have used has been the reflective time line although I used this with a group of teachers on a professional development day (rather than staff here at the uni). That said it worked really well and some of the shared insights and reflections created very interesting discussions.

I took the line back a bit further than the three years in the manual and included significant incidences in their lives that had impacted on their decision to go into a career in education and to develop the path they had once there. It was amazing to see not only the degree of commonality (although situations may be different the underlying reasons were very similar) and the sense of comradeship that the task generated."

Next steps

To find out more about the toolkit, please contact **Paul Gentle**
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