
Taking steps that make you feel dizzy: personal reflections on module 1 of the Future Leaders programme



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The Future Leaders programme [<http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/support/flp/>] is aimed at professionals in academic information services (IS) who aspire to a strategic role and who have proven management experience. The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education runs the programme, with support from SCONUL, UCISA and the British Library. It commenced in March 2006 with 21 participants from library and computing environments. Its focus is to deepen participants' understanding of the IS leadership challenge and to enable them to learn how to lead. Many programmes bill themselves similarly but this one has a number of distinctive characteristics:

- year-long format, consisting of two residential plenary modules and three meetings of

individual learning sets, each consisting of seven members; the final event is a Capstone Day in March 2007 to present, share and review achievements and learning

- focus on learning to lead rather than attempting to teach to lead
- emphasis on self-awareness and ongoing reflection, including a regular supply of stimulating readings and strong encouragement to maintain a reflective journal
- detailed pre-course interaction at an individual level with programme facilitators, including interview, analysis of Myers-Briggs Type Indicator data and presentation of 360° feedback report
- execution of a self-selected project, aligned with institutional priorities, regularly reported and supported at learning sets during the year
- availability of ongoing supports, including VLE forum and resources list, teleconferences and access to programme facilitators and participants
- establishment of a highly supportive network of contacts with similar aspirations and challenges, cemented by sharing of experiences and the atmosphere of openness, honesty and trust created from the beginning by facilitators and participants alike.

Module 1, described in the previous issue of *SCONUL Focus*, concentrated on self-awareness, particularly personal leadership style and its impact on others.¹ From the outset there was a very strong personal element and an atmosphere far more conducive to self-disclosure than is typical or had been anticipated. We learned a lot about each other and about ourselves in a relatively short space of time. A recurrent theme throughout the four days was the importance of raising the quality of thinking and conversation, particularly by practising a technique called 'action inquiry' which involves heightened awareness and deep listening in the course of action (e.g. meetings). This technique, along with many other experiences, features in our personal reflections on Module 1 which follow.

You miss too much if you stop to think ...
Dilys Young

For many of us, I guess we had reached a plateau in our careers and needed re-energising and challenging to consider our potential and motivation to take the next step on the career ladder and become service leaders rather than service managers. Module 1 certainly provided much food for

thought in this respect, not only challenging our assumptions about ourselves and others, our personal management style and our ability and potential to become future leaders, but also enabling us to take time away from the pressures of everyday work to reflect on what we would need both personally and professionally to achieve this.

A number of theoretical frameworks and leadership models were presented in the first module and these were interspersed with short, practical exercises, discussions and group work to consider our own orientation towards leadership and to raise our quality of thinking. The most interesting technique, as far as I was concerned, was the concept of 'action inquiry' whereby leaders are required to act within the moment, using a range of perspectives to judge situations and apply appropriate skills to reach solutions. This is a very different way of relating to people and situations for many of us who currently use techniques around action, reflection, review and re-action. Also tapping into the emotional side of our management style preferences and using this to relate more effectively to the feelings and emotions of colleagues whilst dealing with a difficult situation was a challenge which few of us had experienced previously. A technique from the first module which I found particularly thought-provoking is the concept of 'difficult conversations' whereby we need to analyse the 'feelings' and 'identity' side of interactions as well as understanding the 'what happened' element of a situation. This is a powerful way of getting to the heart of a difficult situation and really understanding what the other person is experiencing at a deeper level rather than concentrating on the version of events that we believe happened.

Another thing that struck me as particularly useful was the understanding that the vast majority of information and IT workers within our sector are by nature introverted and we had great fun discovering what it felt like to be an introvert for those few of us whose profiles were more extraverted, and vice versa. The concept of 'inner voices' was also interesting as it helped explain the dialogue which often goes on in our heads as we wrestle to resolve a difficult situation. Interesting too, how we all have some sort of 'gremlin' casting self-doubt, doom and gloom over our reasoning at times! Overall, Module 1 was, for me, all about how my own motivations, personality traits and management style preferences impact on my relationships, not only with colleagues, but with the wider world. Whilst the module focused very much on 'self' it was more about awareness-rais-

ing than about modifying styles and preferences. After all, if we understand ourselves better we are more likely to be able to empathise with others, achieve greater harmony and develop skills that enhance and make our interactions in everyday work, life and play more effective. So, although you might not be able to teach an old dog new tricks, the Future Leaders programme has helped me recognise that there are a lot of tricks I am not utilising as fully or effectively as I could and that doing so might help me keep more balls in the air as I juggle the many and varied challenges of being a service manager within the modern information services environment.

Leaving the comfort zone

Annie Kilner

A key part of Module 1 was the four day residential programme which brought the whole group together in Birmingham for the first time. Most of us had at least attempted the essential reading beforehand, but this in no way prepared us for what proved to be an intense and quite extraordinary week of self discovery and awakened sensitivity. We were immediately thrust into a process not unlike speed-dating: we moved around the group exchanging information about ourselves, our aspirations, our self doubts and gathered our first impressions. It was a highly effective ice-breaker and created bonds within the group that grew and expanded rapidly over the next few days.

Some of the most revealing group exercises were those that explored self perception and, more fascinating still, the perceptions of others in regard to ourselves. Self-analysis games involving placing oneself within the group in terms of position, power and influence were at once fun, challenging and, in truth, a little scary for some of us. These deceptively playful activities revealed some hitherto unconscious attitudes and vulnerabilities that were sometimes uncomfortable to face. In fact, leaving the 'comfort zone' was a key theme and it generated a quality of thought and depth of discussion which was both stimulating and illuminating. In particular, psychologically, it prised open some 'closed doors' for many of us. This allowed the group to develop into a confidential forum in which even some of the more introverted among us felt able to explore our emotional responses and sound our normally unvoiced ideas. Indeed, the spirit of trust and mutual support was one of the most valuable aspects of the week and has been continued through into the learning sets.

By the end of the residential we had gleaned some important insights into what good leadership might look like. Although there was a great deal of consensus on this, we were encouraged to look behind the typical leadership types (for example, messiah, dictator, liberator, ambassador) and pose some questions about how these models operated (on faith, charisma, coercion or goodwill perhaps). The focus inevitably came back to ourselves and our personal vision and style. This gave us a glimpse of how our own leadership models worked on conscious and unconscious levels. Once again, it was the latter, with its rich vein of insight into our motivations and insecurities, that was especially thought-provoking and disturbing. Following on from this, it was intriguing to see individual leadership styles or 'signatures' emerge during that few days. What we learned from each other was just as valuable as the gems of wisdom picked up from our very talented and incisive facilitators John Mulligan and Susan Chadwick. Even the very few hours of 'play' we had were put to good use. Some very fruitful lines of discussion were continued in the more informal setting of the bar later in the day! There was the odd rebellion but even these were learning processes which served to strengthen the group as an entity.

Module 1 was a spring board. It gave us a chance to take a long look at ourselves and reflect on what we needed to do as individuals to nurture and develop our leadership signatures. It also provided the impetus to practice some interesting techniques and ideas back in the workplace. The really wonderful thing, though, is that it has opened doors in all of us – if we step outside and take to the road the journey could be very exciting.

Meeting myself

John Cox

The four days of Module 1 were the most exhausting I can recall for any course, but also by some distance the most influential. The appetite for change can be somewhat diminished after more than ten years in managerial roles and on reaching the mid-forties. My style had become almost too well established and needed to be challenged. This certainly happened during Module 1 when, thanks to very skilful facilitation and the honesty of my fellow learners, everything was up for grabs. I became much more aware of the impact that my leadership style has and can have on others. The Myers-Briggs type indicator (MBTI) revealed me as having ISTJ (introverted, sensing, thinking and judging) preferences. This type has

been summarised as 'life's natural organisers' and has its share of strengths, but also a number of blind spots.² In my case, I discovered that I need to behave 'out of type' more frequently in order to be more of a leader and particularly to influence a wider range of people positively.

My 360° feedback supported this view. Reading a 25-page feedback report about oneself is an amazing experience. This document explored many dimensions as viewed by my managers, peers and immediate reports. After a short period of denial ('this can't be me!'), I found it hugely insightful. The real discovery for me was that I too had grown frustrated with the limitations of my style and wanted to experiment with different approaches, bringing a more creative and less intense 'me' to the workplace. The experience has been liberating and, instead of addressing projects or short-term transactions simply as things to be done, I am aspiring to greater effectiveness than efficiency and am learning to look for developmental opportunities for myself and others. Action inquiry, although I am an unskilled practitioner compared with one of our facilitators, John Mulligan, has stimulated a more questioning approach, with a greater and healthier emphasis on understanding than rushing to judgement. This makes work a more stimulating place for me at least, but I hope also for others in my teams.

A key emphasis for me throughout Module 1 was the people dimension. I realised the importance not only of listening and assimilating group dynamics but also of having a definite personal presence as a leader. Confident interaction with others is vital in terms of influencing people and events. Establishing a wider range of relationships and building rapport emerged as very significant themes for me, both at and outside work. It was once said of the (unusually academic) ex-England cricket captain Mike Brearley that he had 'a degree in people' due to his success at getting the best out of individuals in his team. Module 1 made me sit up and take notice of this facility and look beyond the obvious in others. A greater investment of time in people than Gantt charts has sometimes made my days a bit more chaotic, but I've learned to live with an untidy desk!

A further powerful tool I learned to use was the reflective journal. I had always tended to reflect on situations heretofore but only in my head. There is a marked difference in the quality of reflection when thoughts are transmitted to paper. Keeping a journal has helped me greatly to make sense of recent or upcoming situations, giving me

more insights than previously. It also keeps me on track in terms of trying to continue practising some of the new techniques I learned on Module 1 and evaluating progress with these. Above all, it makes me confront myself and my vulnerabilities as a person and a leader honestly and constructively. There is no hiding place on paper and I've found that it's a great place to continue meeting myself!

CONCLUSION

So, does the course deliver what it sets out to? For each of us Module 1 was a learning journey during which we were able to focus primarily on ourselves and the impact our traits and personal leadership styles have on others. It provided us with new understanding about our existing skills and knowledge whilst at the same time reframing these in the light of new self-awareness. It provided a 'safe' environment for testing out new techniques and taking risks in going beyond our usual, comfortable patterns of behaviour. It allowed us time and space to explore our beliefs and assumptions about management and leadership. It was fast moving, emotional, personal and illuminating and allowed us to engage with new colleagues in a spirit of trust and confidentiality. The facilitators were excellent, the food was very good (and lots of it), the bar was open long hours, the company was congenial, the rooms were comfortable and we also had lots of fun. Would we do it again? Certainly. Would we recommend others to do it? Without doubt, as long as you're prepared to be challenged, energised, refreshed and exhausted! Will it make a difference to us? We all intend it to. Perhaps our own leaders and our work colleagues are best placed to judge the long-term impact of this never-to-be-forgotten programme.

REFERENCES

- 1 V. Stevenson, 'Future Leaders Programme, March 2006-2007', *SCONUL Focus*, 37, 2006, pp 19-20
- 2 O. Kroeger, J. M. Thuesen and H. Rutledge, *Type talk at work: how the 16 personality types determine your success on the job*, New York: Dell Publishing, 2002