

## **Abstract**

The data on which this study is based comes from a longitudinal project which is being conducted with one large Further Education College in the North West of England. It was collected from groups of first line and middle managers and members of the college strategic management team involved in a programme of work based planned provision to develop leadership skills (Centre for Excellence in Leadership 2005). The programme has been running since 2003. Initially the managers involved in the programme were exclusively lecturers promoted to middle management positions such as curriculum group leaders and course team leaders. As the project developed the group also included managers and leaders from student services, administration and human resource managers.

The study provides some sense of how the middle leadership role is experienced and viewed within a context of policy and funding driven change and how respondents view their own role as professionals and managers within this context. It uses this experience as a basis for assessing the value of the kind of educational intervention constituted by the programme. Data was collected through evaluations, critical incident reports, semi-structured interviews and critical reflection on action learning projects.

The data shows how professional staff in the post-school sector, operating as first-line or middle managers, make sense of a role which is far from certain and often requires the capacity to live on the edge, while maintaining a commitment to professional values (Edwards and Coffield 2007). It shows that appropriately organised and structured professional development opportunities can support colleagues in this turbulent context and enable them to develop as self-critical and reflective educational leaders.

The study also suggests that local ecology, learner's history, institutional context and mission (Hamilton 2007) may be of particular significance in assessing the impact of professional development and work focussed learning on policy and practice, particularly in the English Further Education sector.

## **Introduction**

The Further Education (FE) sector in England has since the 1980s undergone a series of transformations and pressures which have created a sense of constant turbulence and change. This time has been one when within the FE sector staff have had roles characterised by uncertainty and insecurity created by major policy and funding changes accompanied by managerial and organisational responses within institutions. Through these shifts there have remained two constant themes. One has been the importance of management. The other has been the tension between new managerial approaches and the problematic and contested ideas of supporting staff to lead and manage constant change.

### **Change within the sector:**

Since the 1980s across all sectors in education and indeed in the public sector as a whole, demands for new forms of accountability and the application of market testing began to be seen as undermining the claims to autonomy and self direction of a wide range of occupations.

Edwards and Coffield (2007) stress the size and complexity of the sector and make the point that it is difficult to characterize it but suggest that two factors stand out in its recent history: “unprecedented and welcome levels of funding; and unrelenting and generally less welcome, waves of change and turbulence” (p. 123). Leadership and professionalism within further education have to be viewed within the constraints of such a consistently turbulent environment. Gleeson points out that in the period immediately following incorporation of FE colleges in 1992, the emphasis was initially placed much more strongly on central direction, management by performance and targets via external models of quality assurance and the explicit demand for the “right to manage” (Gleeson and Shain 1999). Colleges were encouraged to see themselves as competitors within an open market aiming to maximise

funding through the development of an entrepreneurial culture in response to new external funding models. It was not until the late 1990s that Further Education Colleges began to discover the “soft rhetoric of change”. After the initial period which could legitimately be described as one of “managerial excess” (Simkins and Lumby, 2002) external policy pressures on colleges emphasised partnership, cooperation and community. As Gleeson (2001) and others suggest this change in external pressure was paralleled by a similar shift in language and managerial practice within colleges.

However, Gleeson emphasises that over time it is clear that the general shift towards a rhetoric of leadership and collegiality remain less developed and embedded in further education than elsewhere in the public sector and there may still be a marked reluctance to embrace models of devolved power and professional autonomy. (Gleeson 2005).

In the United Kingdom education context, demand for continuous change in practice has become the norm and innovation has become a necessity rather than a choice for most educational institutions. This paper proposes that this is markedly pronounced in the further education sector and supports Coffield’s 2007 acknowledgement of the sector undergoing waves of turbulent change. The increased emphasis on change and innovation alongside increased productivity and raising standards has called for the creation of systems and structures where new ideas can be fostered, managed effectively and built into the dominant cultures of organisations. This paper questions how first-line and middle managers should be supported in their role as change agents and asks whether this is possible through a work based partnership learning programme between an employer and a Higher Education learning programme. What is unusual about this programme is the role of the college as employer and work based learning partner. Within the business world there are examples of chief executive officers setting companies on deliberate courses of learning and transformation (Kleiner and Roth 200), but such examples do not appear to the same extent within education research. This paper and ongoing longitudinal study attempts to reduce this gap. In 2003 the college senior management team (SMT) initiated the change agenda partly through the vehicle of the

work based learning and higher education management development programme. The intention was to use the programme and its outcomes to examine issues of structures, relationships, stress, conflict, communication and behaviour across a large multi-centred organisation. The fundamental intention was to identify and equip a group of managers with the skills and attitudes required to manage change and also become the group on which succession planning strategies could be based. The basic mechanism for this ambitious project was to encourage and support first line and middle managers as insider researchers and change agents (Coughlin 2003). The main concern of this paper is to examine the manager as action researcher within a work based formal higher education learning programme. Lessons from this study may be of importance to managers and organisations adopting this process on an international basis, and of particular importance to countries such as the United Kingdom, where professional development policy in many contexts is making work based practitioner research almost a prerequisite for institutionally supported continuing professional development.

### **Research Method**

The data comes from a longitudinal project which is being conducted with one large further education college in England.(Aiello Clarke and Hammersley-Fletcher 2008, Aiello and Clarke 2009) Data was collected through evaluations, critical incident reports, semi-structured interviews and critical reflection on action learning projects with participants and members of the Senior Management team supporting the initiative.

The data shows how professional FE staff, operating as first-line or middle managers, make sense of a leadership role which is far from certain and often requires the capacity live on the edge, while maintain a commitment to professional values. It also demonstrates the tensions in supporting an initiative and ensuring its engagement within the day to day context of the organisation. It was essential to ensure both confidentiality and anonymity to respondents. In undertaking the project it was therefore essential, as far as possible to ensure confidentiality

and anonymity in terms of the source of any comments being traced back to an institution or individual. However it is interesting to note that some respondents were keen to be identified to management in their organisation so that they could be identified and their voice could be heard.

A longitudinal study of one FE College suffers from the limitations of a case study approach but does suggest that local ecology; learners, history, institutional context and mission (Hamilton 2007) may be of particular significance in assessing the impact of policy on practice particularly in the Further Education context. The research project has been running since 2003. Initially middle managers interviewed were exclusively lecturers promoted to middle management positions such as curriculum group leaders and course team leaders however, as the project developed the group also included managers and leaders from student support services, administration and human resource managers. As the project developed interviews have also been carried out with the senior managers responsible for the programme and significantly for succession planning.

### **Context:**

The college under study is a large successful further education college in the North West of England. The college has over 24,000 students and a workforce of over 2,000 full and part-time employees. In England further education colleges were originally vocationally orientated training providers but as with the college under study they now offer a comprehensive range of programmes from basic skills to graduate and postgraduate programmes. The College has experienced change and turbulence post incorporation in 1993 but is now in sound financial health, has a reputation for excellence and has enjoyed “outstanding” status since its most recent Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) inspection. During this period a

commitment to quality and service to its community has been the explicit aim of the principal and senior management team who are committed to maintaining this through the development of appropriate management and leadership processes, including succession planning strategies. To that end in May 2002 an in-house work based learning management development programme was devised in conjunction with Liverpool John Mores University (LJMU) which was to be rooted in the principles of action learning and action research as tools for management and leadership development. It was also seen as a way developing the managers as change agents throughout the organisation. The use of action research and action learning for management development is not new. Writers such as Revans (1986) provide a range of case study evidence as to the effects of such learning processes. However, this project and this research is unusual in the use of managers from across the same institution, the relationship with the College with the principal and SMT playing an active role in the action research element, and the explicit aim of using the action research and action learning model as the basis for managing change, supporting succession planning and even as part of building a learning organisation as described by Senge (1992). The attractive concept of the learning organisation, as promoted by a number of writers (Argyris and Schon, (1997) and Senge (1990, 1992) was a source of inspiration to this thinking. These unusual elements make the study important within the current strategy in many UK public sector professional organisations of developing the professional as researcher on practice. Using first line and middle managers as change agents is a relatively recent but important change "discontinuous and radical organisational change is extending our notion of the change agent role beyond the singular, full-time mandated individual (usually a seconded manager or external consultant) to encompass a more diverse, multi functional , mixed status cast of characters who are now accommodating change responsibilities within their existing operational, professional or technical roles" (Doyle 2002 p.465). This particular development in the first line and middle management role from change novice to change expert is considered in this study. This is also taking place as an element of a succession planning strategy explicitly identified by the work

based learning partner as an opportunity to identify prospective leadership candidates with the aim of providing opportunities for developing their leadership skills.

**The work based programme:**

The programme was designed collaboratively with Liverpool John Moores University as the higher education institution (HEI) and accrediting body and the College as equal partners. The basic starting point for the programme design was the College insistence on being an active partner with the university, not only designing the programme but also in delivering some sessions, setting action research projects based on current targets, supporting colleagues as insider researcher and acting as the receiver of research project recommendations. What may be significant here is that even with similar sponsored courses the partner tends to take a more distanced and passive approach. College middle and first line managers initially enrol on a postgraduate certificate in management. They can then choose to develop their award into an MA by completing further modules in the MA programme. For this study the work based learning postgraduate certificate is the main focus. Underpinning programme design was the view that individual action research leading to action learning sets provided a model for the development and implementation of an organisational learning culture (Senge 1992) and that to achieve this, a particular “intelligent” leadership style and organisational culture was essential to support managers as insider action researchers and potential agents of change. Participants are taught sessions on organisational cultures, models of leadership, management and change. This then moves into the action research/action learning phase, where participants work in small groups to complete internal action research projects set by the college principal and governing body. All work based projects are real issues of prime importance to the college operating and strategic targets, such as a critical review of the management structure, the role of the governing body, new builds, marketing and so on. The final reports and recommendations are formally presented to the college governing body for action. The principal as chief executive guarantees either direct action based on

recommendations or a detailed rationale for no action. In this forum participants raise their profile as future senior managers and as change agents. As indicated earlier the concept of the learning organisation, as promoted by a number of writers (Agyris and Schon, 1997, Senge, 1990) was a source of inspiration to the programme design. Particularly seductive were the almost inspirational as well as aspirational definitions of Pedlar,(1991) and Senge's (1990) vision of organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to learn together. As part of the action research process in particular managers were encouraged by their employers as well as the university partner to research potentially controversial or contentious areas of the college's operation, striving for debate and change rather than consensus on the following premise:

“A learning organisation consciously permits *contradictions and paradoxes*. In a learning organisation conflicts are not seen as threats to be avoided but as challenges to be met, with the goal of stimulating ongoing debate on rules, insights and principles. (Swieringa and Wierdsma 1992, p.55).

## **Findings**

The following findings are drawn from interviews, evaluations, reflections, critical incident reports and action research projects with participants and college senior managers. This is a long and ambitious project and the findings will be developed into a more detailed critique in further papers. The emphasis in these finding are on participant's views of tensions in their role as middle managers, change agency roles and the effectiveness of the programme in bringing about and maintaining change either in strategic succession planning or the ultimate ambition of it creating a “learning organisation”

Rather than seeing themselves as independent change agents respondents reinforced the widely held view amongst middle managers that it was common for them to see themselves as one-way “conduits” for centrally driven policies, where their role was to engineer consent and compliance. For example, “consultation” was a theme many alluded to;

“My chief role seems to be to convince colleagues of the need for change. The idea of consultation being a process of telling and selling a policy to staff is very useful. It describes what I seem to do a lot. It also seems to be what happens at all levels in the organisation. Apologies are made for the policy or change and then reasons are given for its inevitability.”

**Course team leader (first line manager)**

Almost inevitably it is in this transmission of directives where much of the tension between professional and operational behaviour is witnessed. One respondent outlined the real tension and stress in operating in this way through the reporting of a critical incident.

“My issue relates to the growing tensions emerging from the reorganisation of the College’s support staff in advance of the opening of the new learner centre. A number of meetings have taken place already about the merging of the service and are deeply unhappy about the proposal. ....As a management team we are extremely uncomfortable with this development but it would appear that we have no power to change or slow down its progress. We are however expected to show a united front and put a positive spin on this process. We are charged with explaining developments to staff and giving reasons and the rationale for change.....This is not the first time I have felt isolated in a management situation and so despite some misgivings I must do my best to explain to the individuals concerned that the only motivation for the change is to improve the situation we offer to students. I must cover my personal feelings for the greater good of the service. It is up to all of us to make it work.

(edited by authors)      **Student Services Manager**

A number of respondents identified conflicts between demands made on them by their change management roles and their own professional values.

“Constant change is difficult to handle. Staff, including myself, feel that this has a negative effect on students’ learning. This is supposed to be our priority but it’s hard to convince staff to adopt another change almost on a termly basis. To be honest what we often do is ignore them.”

**Course Team leader Middle manager.**

“As managers we need to recognise that staff operating within constant change find it difficult to cope with the emotional stress this can create. We have to recognise this and deal with people as individuals as well as teams.”

**Course Team leader Middle Manager.**

“Often the best way to support staff is to provide some sort of role model. This may mean supporting individuals on a one to one basis, maybe even teaching their classes at times I’m not sure whether this would be seen as effective management, but it is often very necessary”

**First line Manager**

“In my role dealing with change goes well beyond my technical ability to do the job. It needs good interpersonal and coping skills. So far I have survived, but at times I have been close to the edge.”

**Student Services Co-ordinator**

“My job is essentially a roller-coaster ride with lots of highs and lows. The highs tend to be teaching and helping to maintain student-centredness. The lows are when these are challenged. The course team helps, but it can also be hard to convince friends and colleagues to do something when it’s clear that I don’t really agree with it.”

Although respondents often saw their management roles as confused and contradictory they were able to draw on their professional values and skills in dealing with the conflicting demands placed upon them.

“Basically, by trying to get people to look at my way of thinking, identifying the benefits to them, the organisation, the students etc. Embedding a culture is a huge task but I tend to influence people on my team or for whom I have some kind of responsibility for by reinforcement of the ‘this is the way things are going to be done around here’ mantra. It is not done in a directive manner and confrontation is avoided so that everybody remains on board to some degree even if there is some initial resistance. Sooner more often than later, the issue becomes the norm, and whilst some people may have their daily groans the job still gets done.”

**Course Team leader- First Line Manager**

“ I am still not in a senior position and I've no absolute power to alter things directly, but I will be doing all that I can to influence those people who are in the position to make change. I am lucky in that my line manager is also happy to give me responsibility for things which would normally fall above the scope of my role. This has given me interpersonal relationships with staff whom I wouldn't normally meet or talk to, with whom I can exert my desire for change. This latter technique of going direct to people rather than relying on structures such as faculty meetings is significantly more efficient, albeit unconventional and unorthodox. So I plan to employ it wisely and in moderation.”

**Course Team Leader First Line Manager**

“Like most of my colleagues on the programme I came into this role from a different professional background. For me it was teaching and leading teaching programmes. This programme has been really useful for me in giving me a chance to think, discuss and read about what I have to do or should be doing as a manager. It really strikes me that I have never been taught the skills of management or change and if I hadn't come on the course I wouldn't have been. I don't think most of my colleagues or bosses have. There seems to be a silent

consensus that we will just pick up these skills or have them. It seems crazy we wouldn't now allow a teacher to teach without the qualifications. I have enjoyed the course and I have learned a lot but I am still not sure if I have the skills or if my bosses back in the college take what we are doing here that seriously on a day to day basis"

**The effectiveness of the programme:**

Since 2003 managers as participants have spoken positively of the impact of the programme on their personal development, confidence and motivation. Many have gone on to complete appropriate Masters programmes and many have been promoted both internally and externally having completed the programme. A key issue for the insider action researcher (Coughlan 2003) is the organisational support required to challenge existing practice and almost all participants have affirmed that such support and encouragement had been extended to them whilst completing programme research tasks. None of the over 100 participating managers had regretted taking the course. While access to the college principal and senior management team in their normal work was never particularly difficult participants appreciated the degree of "specialness" and access to work place systems, resources and influence provided to them whilst participating on the programme. There was also a general consensus that the academic learning input from the university was vital in providing "The scene outside the trenches" as one middle manager commented. Reading and reflection on research and theory helped to avoid the danger of too much informal institutional introspection. This is a danger of internal staff development programmes identified by many participants in the programme. Interview data in relation to the action research and assignment tasks is largely very positive. Most participants stated that the effect of being encouraged to investigate complex and potentially controversial areas of the college's life was liberating and empowering-more so than had been the case with any other professional development previously undertaken. Despite the pressures on time and workload, which are serious professional issues, most found the experience personally and professionally significant;

“The most important professional development opportunity I’ve ever had....invaluable experience for me”

**Curriculum Group Manager**

“I certainly rediscovered my love of learning...I have really valued and appreciated the opportunity”

**Curriculum Group Manager**

“The programme has provided me with a platform and qualification to move my career forward”

**Administration middle manager**

“I have enjoyed doing it and it has taught me that I can be successful in an area outside teaching....I think the money invested in me has been recouped in terms of the changes in me as a leader”

**Course team leader.**

The extent to which the college has become a learning organisation and the role of the programme in meeting that aim has been a matter of recurring consideration at the end of each programme. Even managers with a deep suspicion of anything deemed to be “management jargon” or “psycho-babble” a view expressed by participants about the messianic tone of much of the learning organisation rhetoric, appeared ready to accept the concept of the learning organisation as an appropriate aspirational state of being for the college.

Interestingly, the term “learning organisation” has found its way into the college lexicon and an annual college research day is identified as an explicit part of developing the college as a learning organisation. However, it is still unclear what role the management development programme explicitly plays in this process.

One emerging conclusion therefore from this piece of longitudinal research is that work based management development through the vehicle of an employer supported and designed higher education academic programme may constitute an effective model for “leadership training”,

“succession planning” and “workforce development”. However, there is an important sting in the tail. All of the above positive, critical and informed evaluations both from part participants and employers refer to managers whilst they are participating or have just completed the programme. Interviews taken two or three years after completion of the programme still comment favourably on the quality and benefits of the programme but there is concern about how it fits into normal ongoing college processes and systems.

“I felt inspired after presenting my research recommendations and hearing the Principalship’s commitment to my recommendations. But back in my normal role this and other work on the programme seemed to be quickly forgotten. In fact and I don’t want to be cynical but some of my colleagues took pleasure in ridiculing my “pretensions”. I was quickly put in my place. Even my line manager didn’t want to work with me on any different level. I really think there is a need for some of the senior staff to go on this programme”.

### **Curriculum Group Manager**

This is not an unusual comment and the return to role is an issue which needs to be addressed by all participants in the programme design.

Equally comments from members of the planning senior management programme team identifying concerns about the programme focus and uncertainty about its link to succession planning need to be addressed by all programme designers if the programme is to meet all of its ambitious aims. At this point transfer back to the organisation and embedding of ideas and individual talents within the organisation must be addressed.

## **Conclusions:**

It is important to recognise the specific context and limitations of the study. However, this does not preclude the transferability of the design and programme processes to other contexts. This study suggests that it may be possible to create a process and culture within an organisation where managers operating as learners and insider action researchers can be instrumental in creating effective change and development. This research suggests that the action researcher/change agency role for the manager needs to be supported and driven institutionally by the employing body if it is to be positive for the individual manager and the organisation. From this research it is not support on the programme which is the issue but dealing effectively with the individual's return to their organisational role. Finally to end on an even more ambitious note, the College and University experience outlined here may demonstrate that a collaborative approach to learning with a higher education organisation and an involved and responsive employer might be effective in translating the nebulous concepts of "professionals/managers as researchers" (Day 1998), "communities of practice" (Wenger and Snyder 2000) or "learning organisations" (Senge 1991) into a functional reality.

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