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Gaining ground with Leading Learning

With arrangements for the third cohort of senior cultural managers to take part in the Leading Learning programme well under way, The Leisure Review was invited to see this cultural leadership scheme at close quarters.

In 2010 the National Culture Forum's Leading Learning programme goes into its third year having already put more than sixty senior managers drawn from all points of the sport, leisure and culture sector through an intensive course of leadership training. The programme is clear in its aim: to equip senior managers of sport, leisure and culture services in local authorities and leisure trusts across the UK with the skills to develop their careers in local government with a view to achieving director and chief executive levels. With cohorts of skilled cultural leaders ready for action, the theory is that culture can be permanently embedded within local government services by putting officers with cultural experience at the top of the sector.

Invited to see this process at first hand, The Leisure Review visited the Woodside conference centre in Kenilworth, Warwickshire during the first of the programme's three 09/10 residentials. A management of change session was underway, presenting a scene familiar to many MBA courses and generic leadership programmes. The room was full and each of the thirty or so students was attentive and engaged. There was good interaction among the group, with challenging questions and some robust debate as specific issues were discussed. The rather intense atmosphere suggested that some people would find themselves, or be encouraged to venture, outside their personal comfort zone quite quickly but the general mood of the assembled group seemed to be supportive and encouraging; although noticeably focused, the discussion was regularly punctuated by laughter which served to lighten proceedings before heading into another area of debate.

These residential sessions, all of which are held at the Woodside centre, comprise one of five main components of the Leading Learning programme. In addition to the six days of residential teaching each participant takes part in 360-degree personal development planning, which involves the input of a number of colleagues, peers and line managers from the individual's workplace to an evaluation of performance and personal qualities. Facilitated action learning sets, arranged geographically, provide the opportunity for reflective learning and the programme's website offers resources to support all the learning processes. The mentoring programme, which offers one-to-one support for each participant from someone already working at director or chief executive level, is cited as among the most valuable and rewarding of the programme's components.

Leading Learning is one of a number of schemes that sit under the umbrella of the Cultural Leadership Programme, an initiative launched in 2006 by Tessa Jowell and Gordon Brown, then culture secretary and chancellor respectively, that committed £12 million of funding to the "future sustainability and development" of the cultural and creative sectors. With the support of this network, Leading Learning has developed its own programme to target its own particular sector. Within this sector the initiative has been able to count on the assistance of the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), the London and East of England cultural improvement groups, as well as National Culture Forum members, the Chief Cultural and Leisure Officers Association (CLOA), Sporta (representing sport and leisure trusts) and the Society of Chief Librarians. All these organisations, and the IDeA and MLA in particular, have offered generous bursary support to the programme for its second year.

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The path to enlightenment by way of Kenilworth

“The programme is clear in its aim: to equip senior managers of sport, leisure and culture services in local authorities and leisure trusts across the UK with the skills to develop their careers in local government with a view to achieving director and chief executive levels”



The Woodside conference centre in Warwickshire

With the cost of a place on the programme standing at £3,500 in 2009/10 (which will be rising to £5,000 in 2010/11 when Cultural Leadership Programme funding comes to an end), each participant is making a significant financial commitment and, as Sue Isherwood, director of Leading Learning, explained, bursaries have played an important role in ensuring that the programme is accessible to a wide range of participants. "The programme is aimed at senior managers of cultural services in local government or organisations that deliver on behalf of local government," she said. "The whole range of cultural services have been represented, including sport, tourism and open space; we had an archaeologist on the first cohort and a seafront director on the second. There is a range of seniority because the nature of each local authority varies and no two job titles are the same, which serves to illustrate just how fluid local government is. However, everyone on the programme is responsible for the management of more than one area of culture."

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Martyn Allison, who as the IDeA's cultural adviser has been closely involved with the development and delivery of the Leading Learning programme, emphasised that it is not just about leadership of, or within, the culture sector. "The whole concept really emerged from conversations we were having five years ago in which we were wondering where the next leaders were coming from," he said. "There are very few local authority leaders from a background of management within the culture sector but cultural leaders have just the skills local authorities need. Cultural leaders generally haven't seen themselves as leaders in the wider context and they need general leadership skills to progress into these senior positions, skills that will enable them to cope outside their comfort zones. Research from the MLA suggests that a lack of leadership skills means that culture doesn't get round the top table, which is why the MLA has been so supportive of the scheme. We want the people on the Leading Learning programme to become leaders within local government rather than within culture. None of the leadership on this programme is about culture; it is all about topics such as the management of change, financial management and political skills."

Around the lunch table, conversations with some of the participants suggested that this message had been understood. Asked why they were here, most were clear about what they wanted from the course, which was a variation on the theme of building skills as part of the personal development required to develop a career. New responsibilities and new roles, whether with their existing employers or their next, were recurrent themes. Later, away from the Woodside centre, The Leisure Review was able to talk at greater length to some of the individuals who had completed the programme in its first year. They told similar stories.

Adele Poppleton, arts and creative economy development manager at Kirklees, explained that she had been pursuing her own career development plan when she first heard of Leading Learning. Looking for an in-depth leadership programme after a few in-house courses, she thought that Leading Learning might be what she was after, and so it proved.

"It really increased my confidence," she said. "The programme made me aware of my strengths as a leader and of how I am perceived. Working with my mentor has been excellent. The mentoring has been about my potential, individually tailored to help me look at myself as a leader. I found that fulfilling. It helped me address how I connect with people and also made me aware of my own transferable skills. By end of the programme I realised that the skills I have can be taken into other areas. This made me look at a different career path and made me realise that I can represent culture and the arts in these other roles. The first days of the residential were quite difficult for me. There were some very experienced people there but by the third residential I realised that I was further on than some people in some areas. The programme helped us all see things in a different way but I also realised that the roles in each local authority are so different there's no standard role."

Howard Barnes had recently taken up a new post, the role of service director for culture at the London Borough of Islington, and was able to build Leading Learning into his personal development programme. "It

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was an interesting experience” he said. “One tends to pick what’s pertinent to you from courses and leadership programmes but one of the most useful elements was that there were some very senior people presenting, senior figures explaining the learning they had gained through their own cultural careers.”

Having completed a masters degree and been on a number of internal leadership courses, Barnes recognises the role of the speakers in delivering an effective learning experience. “A lot of the value [of such programmes] is down to the quality of the external speakers,” he said. “Seventy to eighty percent of the speakers on this programme were very useful, which is an excellent strike rate. There were some really dynamic and inspirational speakers who certainly inspired me. There comes a time in your career when you ask yourself whether you can take that next step. You can tend to stay in your own sector from a comfort perspective but after a while you realise that you can step up. The Leading Learning programme really gave me confidence, which is what I needed from it. It has really given me self-awareness and I feel that I can lead, not only in cultural areas but other areas as well.”

Ongoing external evaluation of the Leading Learning programme will gauge the extent to which these views are reflected across the programme as a whole but the only real test of success will be a roll call of the names at the top of local authorities across the UK in the next five to ten years. The alumni of Leading Learning will, we hope, be noticeable by their presence.

For full details of the Leading Learning programme, including details of places for 2010/11, contact Sue Isherwood at leadership@cloa.org.uk or visit www.ncf-leadinglearning.org

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