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Leading Learning: what we've achieved and why there is still work to do

Sue Isherwood and Martyn Allison offer a brief history of the Leading Learning Programme and explain why, after three and half years of success, it is still needed by the sport, leisure and culture sector.

The Leading Learning Programme was designed to develop the leadership capability of senior managers across culture and leisure services working in or closely with local government throughout the UK. It was a sector response, led by CLOA and Nalgao (now Arts Development: UK) on behalf of the National Culture Forum (NCF), to the Labour government's recognition of the need to ensure strong leadership for the future health of the culture and creative sector. This recognition led to the creation of the Cultural Leadership Programme (CLP) in 2006/07 with £12 million of funding from the Treasury to be spent over three years.

In 2007 the director of CLP, Hilary Carty, was persuaded by the importance of leadership development within the culture and leisure sector of local government, prompting her to suggest a funding application to support a three-year programme to reach a target of 75 senior managers. The NCF set up a steering group for the project and an application to develop a pilot first year, with two further years of tapering funding, was successful in February 2008. The sum awarded was £130,000 and in April 2008 a director of the newly named Leading Learning Programme was appointed.

Between early May and early September 2008 the programme director worked closely with the steering group to design the pilot programme, researching and choosing the partners to support delivery. A total of 29 participants were recruited for the first year. This first cohort met for the first time at the introductory residential session in mid October 2008, having completed 360-degree assessments in late September. The cost of the first year was fixed at £950 a head to encourage recruitment and in acknowledgment that this was a pilot year but the actual cost per head was much nearer £5,000; £100,000 of the CLP funding was allocated to start up costs and the first year's programme.

The Leading Learning Programme and its successes

The Leading Learning Programme was designed around five different approaches to learning which have remained the same since the pilot year. Content, however, has been adapted and developed in the light of feedback from participants, partners and the independent evaluator, as well as to reflect the changing political and economic environment in which the programme operates. It has also added to its bank of experienced senior mentors and guest speakers throughout the four years since 2008.

After the first year fees were set at a level that more accurately reflected the true costs. Year 2, which still had £30,000 of CLP funding, set fees at £3,500 and subsequent years were set at £4,000. Years 2, 3 and 4 have also been able to provide bursaries of between £1,000 and £1,500 for some participants, provided by NCF member organisations and MLA, IDeA and regional cultural improvement agencies (all in years 2 and 3). So far there have been 86 participants coming from every region of England, with three from Wales and one from Scotland. Budgeting has been tight but by the beginning of Year 4 there was an accumulated surplus that allowed Year 4 to go ahead and would also support a Year 5 programme at the same level of recruitment.

No one who has started the programme has ever dropped out, except for one case of serious illness. Ratings of all active elements have been consistently high from the beginning and levels of satisfaction have increased year on year. The programme now has a wealth of data and feedback demonstrating the change that it has made in individuals' professional competence and personal development.

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The same independent evaluator has assessed the programme since its inception using residential feedback questionnaires, follow-up questionnaires on the delivery of the whole programme and separate evaluations carried out by deliverers of the mentoring and action learning components. Her summative report for the first three years of the programme states: "Participants have given increased average ratings for the residential and mentoring elements of the Programme each year. Action Learning is also consistently rated highly by participants... Each cohort has reported a steady increase in confidence that the Programme would meet their learning needs. Across all years, the majority of participants in each cohort felt that the Programme had met at least 80% of their learning needs." Statements collected from Year 3 participants during a reflective exercise undertaken under the heading 'A Difference I See in Myself' reflect individuals recognising growing confidence in their own abilities and the benefits of seeing their own actions, and those of the services they lead, within a wider perspective.

Need for the Programme

Back in 2007/08 the programme was set up to improve the leadership skills of senior managers and heads of service working across the full range of the culture and leisure sector. The initiating team were aware that very few people from the culture sector went on to become directors and chief executives. We did not think that this was because they lacked inherent ability or the ambition. It was rather that local authority culture did not see managers from the cultural sector as big hitters; senior officers in the sector considered themselves as professionals in their own spheres and did not capitalise on their wider portfolio of local government management knowledge. The Leading Learning Programme therefore aimed to raise both ability and ambition so that we might see a future generation of council chief executives coming from culture and sport.

The economic climate and the coalition government's policies for dealing with it have led to a very different environment across both public and private sectors, an environment in which programme participants have had to deal with major budget and structural changes they could barely have imagined only five years ago. The leadership skills the programme develops are vitally important for the survival of both key individuals and the sector as a whole.

The benefits of investing in leadership development

The benefits of investing in leadership development are now widely appreciated across both the public and private sector, including local government and their partners. In 2009 the LGA workforce survey found that 91% of councils were participating in or running their own leadership development activities.

Leading organisations in the economic downturn brings new challenges, particularly finding ways to significantly reduce services and costs while maintaining or improving workforce morale; many leaders struggle with achieving the cultural change aspects of organisational transformation.

The LGA in their 2010 workforce strategy *Delivering Through People* identified a number of key areas for action:

supporting their political and managerial leaders and partnership boards to develop the leadership skills needed to tackle new challenges

fostering the development of leadership skills and leadership behaviours at all levels in the authority and across public sector partnerships

taking effective action to attract, develop and retain the political and managerial leaders of today and tomorrow

taking effective action to increase the percentage of leaders from diverse backgrounds.

The workforce development survey carried out in 2009 by the Local Government Association also showed that councils then felt they had significant skill gaps in important areas for future success. For senior and middle management these included change management, business process improvement, programme and project management, partnership working and community engagement.

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Experience would suggest that the culture and sport sector is no different and if anything has more significant skill gaps in understanding and delivering public services secured through private, social enterprise and voluntary organisations. Now all providers of culture and sport services are under extreme pressure.

The LGA's Delivering Through People also went on to identify some of the critical skills that councils need for success and again these are equally applicable across all parts of the culture and sport sector. Skills for senior and middle managers include: achieving value for money, outcome-focused services, organisational transformation, partnership working, community engagement, programme and project management, business process improvement and fostering innovation, among others.

The Leading Learning Programme now

The Leading Learning Programme was designed to address both leadership development and some skills development, notably change management and organisational transformation, on the understanding that either individual professional bodies or employers would continue to develop other key management skills through their own programmes. Despite challenging the NCF membership to share the delivery of some of the management skills development, progress was never made and in the current climate maintaining any form of profession-based training is now proving difficult.

The culture and sport sector is starting to show signs of an emerging leadership deficit caused by a range of factors including the loss of senior managers to retirement and redundancy, the externalisation of services to smaller leaner organisations, the downsizing and restructuring of culture and sport services, and the general reluctance to invest in training and development, despite a rhetoric to the contrary.

If leadership development was a priority four years ago when the Leading Learning Programme was created it is an even bigger priority now if we are to grow new leadership capacity across the sector.

The Leading Learning Programme is unique because it was owned by the NCF and represented a shared desire to support the development of leaders irrespective of the professional discipline they came from. This cross-sectoral approach has also facilitated cross-sector learning and helped equip potential leaders with an ability to lead in integrated service positions, thus preparing them for corporate director and chief executive roles in the future.

The existing steering group has recommended that the programme recruits for a fifth year and this would need to begin in September for a December/January 2013 start. Marketing in the current climate is challenging but there are funds to support the offering of some bursaries and active support from NCF members would be welcome.

It is important for the programme to continue. It is also important that it remains, owned, supported and accountable to the NCF if it is to have profile and credibility across the sector.

Sue Isherwood is director of the Leading Learning Programme. Martyn Allison is the former national adviser for culture and sport at the IDeA and has played a leading role in the development and delivery of the Leading Learning Programme

For full details of the Leading Learning Programme visit www.ncfleadinglearning.co.uk The programme is currently recruiting for Year 5 participants and fee discounts are available for those registering before 7 November.

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