

# Leadership – it's a habit of mind

Succession planning and preparation for the leadership challenges of the fast-changing academic environment are a key management pre-occupation in higher education libraries.

**Liz Jolly, Jackie Chelin** and **Neil Wilson** reflect on their experience of the Future Leaders Programme.



ACADEMIC LIBRARIES HAVE a key role to play in the student learning experience. Developing professional leaders who can operate at institutional level to ensure that library and information services are aligned with student needs and institutional strategies is therefore vital.

Succession planning is a major challenge within both the broader higher education sector and the LIS profession. The Future Leaders Programme<sup>1</sup> aims to 'assist experienced professional information services staff (typically covering library, ICT and related services) with proven management experience to deepen their understanding, leadership ability and develop their potential'.<sup>2</sup>

A key part of the course application was the submission of an outline proposal for a change project, which would enable us to practise leadership skills within our own organisation but outside the 'comfort zone' of our LIS departments. One project involved creating a support strategy enabling the organisation to meet its bibliographic service obligations while acknowledging the changing resource discovery landscape. Another aimed to raise awareness of information literacy within the organisation and agree a strategy to support and embed IL within the curriculum. The third concerned scoping an integrated 'Learning Hub' for the university, working with institutional colleagues from a variety of backgrounds to improve services to students.

## Starting out: Module One

The course ran for 12 days (over one year), delivered in three modules of three to four days each (supplemented by three 'Action Learning Set' meetings – more on these later).

Module One focused on exploring oneself and one's values. The array of tools for self-analysis included Margerison McCann's Team Management Profile and Windows on Work values.<sup>3</sup> The former provides insights into how a person prefers to work and how they are likely to interact with others in the workplace.



The latter helps people to understand how their behaviour at work is influenced by their values.

We were also introduced to powerful concepts such as the 'Choice Line'. This is a simple model for visualising one's mental state in response to a particular situation – below the line are negative feelings of powerlessness, above feelings of being energised and empowered. By choosing to take personal responsibility for responses, individuals can move above the line to take control of the situation rather than letting the situation take control of them.

We also considered the portrayal of leadership in film, taking the prison governor in *Brubaker* as an example. He was prepared to sacrifice his personal life for the sake of reforming the corrupt, unjust management and working practices of the prison. This left us with powerful messages about the importance of the integration of personal and work values in leadership.

It took time to feel comfortable speaking personally within the group (objective theories and portrayals of leadership were initially easier to discuss). There was a tendency to retreat into a comfort zone and not make the most of getting to know other participants. However, it did not take long to appreciate the skills of the excellent facilitators and take advantage of the fact that the group contained a wonderful cross-section of people all with similar roles with whom we could learn by sharing our experiences of leadership in various situations.

Reading and course participation in the first module exposed us to a fascinating range of leadership models, while deepening our respect for senior leaders. Some of us initially froze at the seemingly superhuman effort of emulating leadership excellence. However, with our rapidly evolving support network we soon began experimenting with small steps in what we hoped would be the right direction. We had also begun to appreciate the importance of recording and reflecting on our learning in our 'learning journals': we realised



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the need for 'leadership inquiry' – to learn to think and behave like a leader and the importance of doing this all the time. The term refers to 'action inquiry'<sup>4</sup> with respect to leadership, in which comparisons between intention, strategy, action and outcome are key to the learning process and refinement of action.

#### **Smaller, more intimate groups**

The 20 participants of the 2007-08 cohort split into three separate groups called Action Learning Sets. A combination of leadership lab and mutual support network, each session widened horizons. The sets were run according to 'action learning' principles, using the process of self- and peer-assessment. Each individual submitted a personal assessment, received feedback and feed-forward from group members, re-evaluated the self-assessment in the light of this and reviewed and refined the process to enhance its value. The sharing of both positive and negative leadership experiences was invaluable in exposing us to a far wider range of challenges than we might have encountered in our normal work, allowing us to discuss and formulate appropriate responses in a more positive way than would have been possible in isolation.

Meeting with the learning set helped to consolidate relationships with a smaller number of trusted people. It was interesting how we reacted differently to the essential readings and how, as a consequence, we could help each other. Jackie, for instance, took to the upbeat and positive scenarios conveyed by Kouzes and Posner,<sup>5</sup> for example 'enlisting others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspiration', rather than Quinn's<sup>6</sup> image of leaders walking naked into the land of uncertainty!

We met individually with our Action Learning Set leader to discuss feedback from the Leadership Practices Inventory, a 360-degree appraisal given to our line manager, direct reports and peers, based on the work of Kouzes and Posner. This introduced an

unnerving element of uncertainty as we found out more about how our colleagues viewed us. For all of us this provided important insights: for those of us brave enough to discuss the outcomes with colleagues as a group, working relationships were taken to a new level.

#### **Module 2: leadership behaviour**

Module Two focused on leadership behaviour, including influencing skills, team communication and emotional intelligence. One element centred on personal behaviour and finding our own voice as a leader using Kouzes and Posner's leadership practices. These are useful frameworks in attempting to develop leadership practice. Lynne Sedgemoor, the CEO of the Centre for Excellence in Leadership, gave a talk on her leadership 'journey', with an inspiring message of 'be yourself with skill'. This built upon the idea of personal leadership from Module One. There were useful sessions on managing conflicts and balancing the need to challenge team members with the need to support them. More challenging were risk-taking activities and actively seeking out opportunities to grow.

We undertook (with some trepidation) group tasks, such as acting out scenarios and practising storytelling, which proved great fun. These methods develop understanding by using metaphors to create a tangible vision of how the future might look. As well as demonstrating what an impact such activities could have within our own organisations, this approach generated a deep respect and fondness for fellow group members. Developing a relationship of trust and support with other participants was, for all of us, one of the most rewarding aspects of the whole course.

#### **Module 3: Putting it in context**

The final module tackled strategic leadership and organisational change, integrating what we had learned into the context of library and IT services within higher education.

We learnt how to think of our organisations in metaphorical terms, to help us in our approach to culture and change. Two such metaphors are the machine (efficient and rational) and the living organism (responsive and flexible). We had an excellent practical session with Kevan Scholes using his 'Cultural Web'<sup>7</sup> tool. In order to illustrate the importance of acknowledging that colleagues might have differing perceptions of the same situation, he used the example of flicking quickly on screen a picture of Che Guevara. There were various suggestions about what the image was: some of us struggled to see even when told.

Having tested out a range of models and diagnostic tools within a supportive and constructively critical environment, it was energising to select those which would work well for our particular purposes and to employ them at work. A consequences exercise – involving free thinking about the consequences of introducing a particular strategy and of not introducing it – and an 'appreciative inquiry' activity (where a group of colleagues reflect on what is done well in a particular aspect of a service and then build on that) were particularly fruitful for one of us in carrying out their change project.

The Future Leaders Programme raised challenges beyond formal course work. One was translating what we had learnt into higher-quality performance in routine activities back at work. We were grateful for the insights we had gained but colleagues hadn't had that privilege. Other challenges were knowing that we now had to be prepared to take risks and fail, in order to develop; and that leadership excellence might initially be seen as deviance and challenged. Perhaps most difficult of all, we knew we had to lead ourselves as well as our teams. During all this activity, the silent friend, the learning journal, was sitting waiting to help – a place for celebrating any successes and for cathartically recording the setbacks, and the reasons for them. For those who found reflection difficult, using the journal was initially one of the hardest elements of the course. However, we have improved with practice, and the discipline of regular reflection on our learning has been invaluable.

### What did we gain?

So what do we feel we gained by our participation in the course?

**Jackie:** 'My suspicion is that my learning on the programme isn't evident yet to colleagues. However, internally I feel more ready for the leadership challenges ahead – whether or not I have mastered Torbert's action inquiry!<sup>8</sup> (Action inquiry is a way of simultaneously conducting action and inquiry as a disciplined leadership practice, teaching the practitioner how to exercise transforming power at key moments.) I'd like to think that I now have renewed enthusiasm for tackling organisational issues and a more objective view of the role I can play in complementing/developing the skills/strengths of others. I also have a better under-

standing of the role that leaders play in facilitating the actions/achievements of others and I am taken with Blanchard's idea of situational leadership.<sup>9</sup> This is the concept of adopting different leadership styles depending on the person and the circumstances.

All in all, I am better placed to appreciate the institution's organisational dynamics and the wider role that the librarians can play.

**Neil:** 'On a personal level, horizons have widened significantly, offering new leadership strategies and greater choice over career decisions. I also want to experiment and inquire further by trying to make everyday activity a learning opportunity. From an organisational perspective, I measure performance against higher standards and expect more from both leaders and team members. However, I believe the full impact of the programme will not emerge for some time, as changes to behaviour, leadership style and practice become fully assimilated.'

**Liz:** 'One of the biggest lessons for me was realising that leadership is a habit of mind and not just a set of high-level skills (although leadership skills are crucial in developing and underpinning practice). As a senior manager in my division, I have confidence in my professional competence but the course enabled me to think about my role as a professional leader in the wider university. I have gained in this sort of confidence and have learnt the importance of asking questions of myself as well as of others. I know that I must develop and use my positive traits to lead effectively and be true to my core values.'

A common thread was learning from our change projects (the projects that had formed part of our initial application for the course) – but not in the way we anticipated. The impact of changing institutional contexts, and of our growing understanding of the transformational nature of leadership, meant that although the projects did not always progress as intended they still provided fertile ground for our leadership inquiry. In some cases, other organisational priorities intervened to provide additional foci for such inquiry. As well as personal and institutional issues, a major professional issue was highlighted. Other people's lack of confidence in librarians – and professionals' own lack of confidence – is something that we, as future leaders of our profession, together with our professional association, will need to address – within our own organisations and in the broader profession.

For all of us there is a sense that we are continuing, and will continue, to learn how to be a better leader. (Another meeting for participants is being arranged for November in order to maintain the contacts, report back on our experiences since the course ended and to keep up the momentum we gained from our learning sets.) We feel we have the tools and frameworks to enable us to continue to learn about ourselves and our practice and to contribute effectively to the strategic leadership of our organisations. From being a finite leadership programme, the project of leadership is evolving into an exciting, lifetime's journey. [1]

### References

- 1 The programme, subtitled 'Preparing for Service Leadership', was developed by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education with Sconul (Society of College, National and University Libraries), Ucisa (Universities & Colleges Information Systems Association) and the British Library.
- 2 John Mulligan. 'Future Leaders Programme 2007.' Email to LIS-Sconul, 9 October 2006.
- 3 www.tmsdi.com
- 4 B. Torbert and Associates. *Action Inquiry: the secret of timely and transforming leadership*. Berrett-Koehler, 2004.
- 5 J. Kouzes and B. Posner. *The Leadership Challenge*. Jossey-Bass Pub, 2002.
- 6 R. Quinn. *Deep Change*. Jossey-Bass, 1996.
- 7 G. Johnson, K. Scholes and R. Whittington. *Exploring Corporate Strategy*, 7th edn. Financial Times/Prentice Hall, 2007.
- 8 See 4.
- 9 K. H. Blanchard. *Leadership and the One Minute Manager*. Fontana/Collins, 1985.

Liz Jolly (e.c.jolly@salford.ac.uk) is Associate Director (Services & Operations), Information & Learning Services, University of Salford. Jackie Chelin (jacqueline.chelin@uwe.ac.uk) is Deputy Librarian, University of the West of England Library Services. Neil Wilson (neil.wilson@bl.uk) is Head of Bibliographic Development, British Library.

### Further information

- For information on the course content, and how to apply for the 2009-10 cohort: [www.lfhe.ac.uk/support/flp/flpbrochure.pdf](http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/support/flp/flpbrochure.pdf)