

## DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP CAPABILITIES

In our external professional coaching work, the development objectives we encounter most frequently relate to leadership development. This can mean many different things to many different people, but as one University Vice-Chancellor reported in a coaching session, one of the leadership lessons that they had learnt was that ‘while academics may be vocally anti-managerial, there is within the sector, a palpable thirst to be well led’. Yet, there is seemingly something amiss with leadership shown across the UK Higher Education sector. This is not a criticism of any given individual or organisation, since the turbulences outlined in the opening of this book, as well as the individualist nature of academic affiliations, makes any sort of University-based leadership very difficult to do well. In a recent large-scale quantitative study (Erickson, Hanna, & Walker, 2020) which examined the satisfaction of University staff with institutional senior management, the mean approval rating across 78 different UK HEIs was around 10%. No institutions scored over 40% and three institutions scored a

flat 0%. As the authors pithily remarked, ‘Judging by these results, UK HE staff are more likely than not to encounter a poor senior management team’. However, there *are* good leaders at all levels of academia, and it is imperative that we help them to grow and also to help the following generation. As John Adair (2005) states in ‘How to Grow Leaders’, ‘A good leader begets leaders: they are natural leadership mentors’.

There is a massive amount of published work about the notion of leadership, and the sub-field of educational leadership, a little of it aimed at the University sector, where defining what leadership means is notably complex with debates about leadership seeping into every discourse about Higher Education policy and practice and believed by many to be the determining factor in organisational effectiveness (Evans, 2018, p. 47). Yet for all of the research into leadership, there is still much debate around what actually works. There’s no guaranteed effective list of skills, or recipe for success, since leadership is a context-bound practice, and each individual and institutional culture are different. Leadership theory and advice-based publications alike usually advocate for proactivity, a flexibility of approach, effective communication and self-awareness as integral to success. As such we would suggest that development through mentoring and coaching, with their focus on enquiry and listening rather than prescribing answers, can act as essential spaces that develop leaders’ awareness, insight and flexibility.

Institutions may seek to establish formalised mentoring and coaching alongside delivered cohort-based development programmes as ways to, for example, grow institutional ‘future research leaders’, to support those new to doctoral supervision, to support individuals to aspire to or to transition

to a leadership role such as Head of Department, and frequently, to address the advancement of groups who are underrepresented in leadership positions or in the Professoriate. Perhaps you yourself started your journey as a mentor by being recruited into such an initiative? Perhaps, as is frequent, a colleague has recognised your leadership capabilities and turned to you for support. In universities, leadership mentors are usually academic good citizens (Macfarlane, 2007). Or perhaps you have identified a talented researcher or team member, whom you would like to ensure has a cogent mentoring head start?

We suggest that if it is to be effective, the development of leadership thinking and the ability to ‘take the lead’ is required from the earliest stages, not at the point of appointment to a specific role. Though we do recognise that the preparation for impending responsibility is often what gives colleagues the impetus to reach out for a mentoring conversation. Whether or not your mentee or coachee has specified leadership as an explicit goal, it is perhaps worth bearing in mind that concepts of leadership are implicitly bound in with the philosophies of mentoring and coaching, which support the seeking of clarity, self-awareness, making choices for oneself and committing to taking action. Leadership concepts are also intertwined with notions of ‘research independence’ and ‘using initiative’ and are implicit in many of the capabilities required of most colleagues in the University environment. Developing proactivity, effective communication, flexibility and self-awareness are steadfast leadership foundations which will serve individuals as they move forwards in their choice of career and coaching for these outcomes is woven throughout the central section of this book.

## SUPPORTING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Design your approach to help new leaders, proto-leaders or aspiring leaders to take time to reflect upon these overarching leadership ideas:

- What will leadership will require of them, and what attracted them to it?
- How might a leadership role constrain them; what might they have to give up in this new position?
- What sort of leader do they (and don't they) aspire to be?
- Do they have the necessary self-awareness to be effective?
- Do they have the requisite flexibility to lead different individuals in different situations?
- Are they prepared to work in an open-minded way and try out different ways of operating?
- Are they prepared to garner and to reflect on feedback from those they lead and those who have observed them leading?
- To what extent are they comfortable with feeling vulnerable as a leader?

Leadership coaching or mentoring should also focus on helping the individual to develop awareness of their tendencies, reactions and 'blind-spots'. Leaders who are under the misapprehension that they must not show weakness or who must constantly be seen as expert, tend to be far harder to work with – a difficulty which will be shared both by you as the coach or mentor and by their colleagues. As well as offering insightful feedback to your coachee or mentee (see Chapter 12), encourage them to seek out feedback from a range of others, focussing on their leadership style, capability, effectiveness and

the impact it has on others. Further awareness-raising questions are presented below – use your own judgement about when and with which colleagues to apply them:

### LEADERSHIP VISION

- Where do you want the group/team/Department to be in the long-term?
- What, in your group/team/Department, do you want to see more of?
- What are the most important questions that need to be asked in your group/team/Department?

### LEADERSHIP OBJECTIVES

- What does success mean to you? What does it look like?
- What does success look like for those you lead? And to those you lead?
- What does success look like for those you report to?
- What is the contribution your group/team/Department makes to the organisation?
- Where can you make the biggest difference right now?

### LEADERSHIP VALUES

- What in your career are you most proud of?
- What would you want people to say about your group/team/Department?

- What sort of culture do you want to build?
- When others leave your group/team/Department, what do you hope they would take with them?
- What's the greatest challenge about showing leadership in the above areas?

### LEADERSHIP LEARNING

- What's the most vital leadership lesson you've learnt so far?
- If you could change one thing about the leadership shown in your immediate field of contact, what would you change and why?
- Learning what (i.e., fact/skill/technique), would make the biggest difference?
- What difficult decisions have you made that you were (not) satisfied with, and what can you learn from this?
- How do you enable the group/team/Department to contribute to your learning?
- How do you share your learning with the group/team/Department?
- What are the unwritten rules of leadership in your Department and at your institution? What's the learning for you here?

We hope that by recognising mentoring and coaching as a valuable way of developing leadership in universities, and one that can be relevant across all levels of working, we may show you as mentors, how you play an important role in developing sensitive leadership practices, and sustainable leadership cultures.

## REFERENCES

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