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Leadership 2009 5: 365
DOI: 10.1177/1742715009337766

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‘Blended Leadership’: Employee Perspectives on Effective Leadership in the UK Further Education Sector

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Abstract *This article explores employee perspectives on effective leadership in UK Further Education (FE). Studies on leadership effectiveness typically seek either to specify the individual qualities of ‘heroic’ leaders or, increasingly, to highlight the collective nature of ‘post-heroic’ leadership. While these discourses are frequently seen as dichotomous and competing, our research found that FE employees often value practices that combine elements of both. They tended to prefer subtle and versatile practices that we term ‘blended leadership’; an approach that values, for example, both delegation and direction, both proximity and distance and both internal and external engagement. Drawing on other studies which indicate that paradoxical blends of apparently irreconcilable opposites might form the basis for effective leadership, the article considers the implications of this analysis for the study of Higher Education (HE). It concludes by highlighting the potential value of more dialectical approaches to the theory and practice of leadership.*

Keywords *delegation; direction; external; followership; heroic; internal engagements; post-heroic leadership; proximity*

Introduction

This article examines the findings from a research project on effective leader-led relations in the UK Further Education (FE) sector. Informed by critical approaches to leadership studies, the project was concerned to explore the complex relationships between leaders and led and to locate these dynamics within their sector-specific conditions and consequences. While the FE sector is distinctive in many ways, it also has a number of overlaps and collaborations with UK Higher Education (HE). Accordingly, having outlined our main findings, we then consider some of the wider implications of our analysis for researching leader–led relations in the HE sector.

This project recognized that leader–led dynamics occur within particular shifting local, regional, national and global contexts and have complex intended and unintended effects. Context is especially important for understanding FE leadership dynamics. ‘FE’ covers a diverse range of post-compulsory educational provision for

people over 16, taught primarily in general and tertiary FE colleges (similar to community colleges in the USA), sixth-form colleges and specialist colleges. FE colleges (FECs) offer a wide range of courses from basic literacy and numeracy to academic and vocational qualifications for all post-school adults.

The 361 FE colleges in England have a total income of over £6bn, employ over 23,000 staff and educate approximately 3 million people each year (Association of Colleges, 2008). Unlike HE, there is little opportunity in FECs to undertake independent research or scholarship. As teaching organizations, FECs are closely monitored and operate within a complex and turbulent funding and policy environment. One recent report talked about the 'galaxy of oversight, inspection and accreditation bodies' (Foster, 2005) to which FECs are now accountable. Since 2001, FE in England has been managed by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the largest government agency funding education provision. FECs are also subject to regular inspections by Ofsted, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and various financial auditors. Hence, while HE institutions (HEIs) award their own degrees and validate their teaching and research activities through external examining and peer review, FECs are more tightly regulated through numerous external awarding and inspection bodies.

FECs typically operate at the very heart of the communities they serve. They play a key role in providing a 'second chance' for many students in the local community who have previously under-achieved in mainstream education. A significant proportion of FE students are from disadvantaged backgrounds. Operating at the 'leading edge' of poverty and deprivation, FECs seek to ameliorate disadvantage by maintaining a policy of inclusivity. Partly as a result, FECs are frequently viewed as the 'poor relations' of the UK education system. The Foster review (2005: 38) argued that colleges were being 'hampered by their reputation and profile, compared to schools and universities'.¹

Yet, in recent years HE courses in FE colleges and collaborations between FE and HE organizations have significantly increased. FECs now deliver approximately 10 per cent of HE provision in England and nearly 200 FECs have some HE students (Kingston, 2007). These degrees are usually organized through a strategic partnership (FEC staff deliver the degree with university accreditation) or a franchise (HE faculty teach the programme at the FEC). It is increasingly recognized that the FE sector's success in recruiting non-traditional and under-represented students, its local accessibility, flexible delivery methods and close contacts with local schools and employers can help to achieve the UK Government's target of involving 50 per cent of the 18–30 student age range in HE by the year 2010 (Parry et al., 2006) and 40% of working adults with a level 4 qualification by 2020 (The Leitch Report, 2006).

There has also been a significant growth in two-year foundation degrees which are typically awarded by HEIs, devised with employers and delivered by FECs. Pursuing its dual agendas to upskill the workforce and 'widen access' to education, the UK Government is currently encouraging FECs to apply for powers to award their own foundation degrees. FECs are also at the forefront of the government agenda for enhancing skills through employer engagement (Collinson & Collinson, 2008). The potential for further collaboration in the UK between FE, HE and employers is therefore considerable. Conversely, overlaps between FE and HE could intensify competition between the two sectors. Suffice it to say here, that in the context

of these increasingly blurred boundaries between FE and HE, research on FE leadership would seem to be not only important, but also relevant to the study of HE.

Our article begins by briefly reviewing two primary discourses in the leadership effectiveness literature: the heroic and the post-heroic. It then outlines our research findings which reveal that FE employees often value leadership practices that combine elements of both discourses. Drawing on other research that provides support for the view that paradoxical blends of apparently irreconcilable opposites might form the basis for effective leadership, the article considers the implications of this analysis for the study of HE. It concludes by highlighting the potential value of more dialectical approaches to the study of leadership, which acknowledge paradox, ambiguity and multiplicity.

Leadership 'effectiveness': A contested terrain

In recent years, 'effective leadership' has come to be seen as vital for improving organizational performance, particularly in the UK public sector. This view has informed the launch of various government-funded bodies within education specifically designed to improve leadership, for example, in schools (The National College for School Leadership), universities (The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education) and further education (The Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL)). Launched in 2003 to ensure 'world class leadership within the FE sector by 2010', CEL funded the research on which this article is based.

Within the leadership literature, 'effectiveness' remains a contested terrain. Informed mainly by functionalist assumptions and focusing on leader's behaviours and competencies, heroic discourses have been highly influential. For example, effective leaders are typically deemed to provide a clear sense of direction, be strategic, inspirational, charismatic and self-confident, communicate a vision, and foster trust, belonging and commitment (Bryman, 2007). While influential studies document a variety of possible leadership styles and their variation according to context (Goleman, 2000), current debates focus on whether effective leaders are best seen as: creative risk takers, charismatic domineering battlers, ruthless pursuers of performance, dedicated servant leaders or quiet stoics (Wheeler et al., 2007).

However, heroic perspectives have been criticized for romanticizing leaders (Meindl et al., 1985) and adhering to exaggerated views about what individual leaders do and what they can achieve. For Meindl and colleagues, leaders' contribution to a collective enterprise is inevitably somewhat constrained, closely tied to external factors outside a leader's control such as those affecting whole industries. Similarly, Mintzberg (2006) criticises the obsession with heroic leaders, and argues in favour of rethinking organizations as communities of cooperation where leadership roles are shared by various people according to their capabilities.

Such critiques have informed the development of post-heroic discourses, less tied to 'top-down', hierarchical models and more concerned with enhancing communities through dispersed and networked interactions. Post-heroic writers view effective leadership in more relational ways, as 'distributed' (Gronn, 2002), 'shared' (Pearce & Conger, 2003), and 'collaborative' (Jameson, 2007). Others examine the effectiveness of 'co-leadership' and executive role sharing where complementary partnerships are deemed to enhance decision making (Alvarez & Svejnova, 2005). Within

education, where there is considerable interest in the ways that leadership can be distributed (e.g. Spillane, 2006), these ideas would seem particularly pertinent given that teachers act as pedagogical leaders in the classroom.

This post-heroic discourse has also informed a growing interest in 'followership' (Howell & Shamir, 2005). Particularly in the context of flatter hierarchies and greater team working, 'exemplary' followers are seen as essential for successful organizations (Riggio et al., 2008). Challenging traditional views of followers as passive and homogenous, recent writers have emphasised followers' agency (Shamir, 2007), knowledgeability (Collinson, 2005), differences (Kellerman, 2008) and their potential for constructive dissent (Chaleff, 2003; Collinson, 2006, 2008). Hence, while studies of the solo 'heroic leader' have tended to predominate in leadership studies, there has been growing interest in more collective, distributed and 'post-heroic' approaches. These respective discourses that view effective leadership as either an individual or a collective phenomenon are typically competing and in tension with one another. Against this background, we now consider our research findings which explore the perspectives of FE employees on effective leadership.

Exploring effective leader-led relations

Research on leadership effectiveness raises questions about causality. If an organization is performing 'well' or 'poorly', can we attribute this directly to the practices of the current leader? As Meindl et al. (1985) suggested, the effectiveness of individual leaders is difficult to specify because organizations are collective, interdependent enterprises. Rather than presuppose an overly mechanistic causal link between variables (as is sometimes the case in leadership studies) this project was designed to explore respondents' own definitions of effectiveness and attributions of causation.

While our qualitative methodology explored leaders' accounts, it also sought to drill down into organizations to examine subordinates' views about what constitutes effective leadership. Employees would seem particularly well placed to comment on leadership effectiveness since they directly experience the impact of leaders' decision making. Indeed our research in various private and public sector UK organizations over the past 25 years has found that those in subordinate positions are often acutely aware of and sensitive to the signals and symbols that leaders convey, both consciously and unwittingly (e.g. Collinson, 2003). Interviews with those who are required to implement college policies also enable the verbal accounts and claims of leaders to be subjected to a certain degree of verification and scrutiny.

Yet, within the literature remarkably few studies consider employees' preferred leadership practices. Even followership research has tended to concentrate either on (charismatic) leaders' impact on followers' identity (e.g. Lord & Brown, 2004) or on how 'effective followership' might benefit organizations (Kelley, 2004). A few writers highlight the tendency of followers to idealize leaders (Shamir, 1999). Others argue that leadership only exists because followers display 'a childlike dependency' for psychological security that they believe leaders can provide (Gemmell & Oakley, 1992).²

A partial exception is Kouzes and Posner's (2007) large-scale study which found four key qualities that followers value in leaders: honesty, forward looking, competence and inspiring. Of these, honesty was 'the single most important ingredient in

the leader-constituent relationship' (p. 32). The more qualitative research findings presented in this article tend to concur with Kouzes and Posner's findings. Yet, FE respondents also articulated more nuanced and complex perspectives based on their own experience of leadership practices.

Our research project examined how leadership is enacted, distributed and experienced at various hierarchical levels within FECs. Rather than treat leadership as the mysterious, charismatic properties of individual 'heroes', the project explored the dynamic and asymmetrical nature of relationships between those in senior and in more junior positions. It focused on in-depth research in seven English FE colleges over a 2.5 year period.³ Between 2004 and 2006, 140 research interviews were conducted within these general FE colleges, which included two sixth forms. While we explored leader-led relations in seven main colleges, we also researched in another four specialist sub-divisions of these colleges. All the colleges had HE students enrolled and some had separate 'university centres'. The case study organizations were selected to provide a diverse range of organizations in terms of size, performance, location and local community features. Although each FEC was treated as a separate 'case', for the purposes of this article, findings are presented in terms of general patterns.

Respondents were interviewed at different hierarchical levels beginning with Principals and Heads then moving down into the organization. Given the possible sensitivities involved, all interviewees and institutions were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Semi-structured research interviews covered the same questions and typically lasted approximately one hour. The same standard list of 12 interview questions was used, but as much space as possible was left open, enabling respondents to raise additional themes. In addition to conducting the research interviews and examining documentary material, information was gleaned in feedback sessions with case study colleges and in presentations at sector-specific workshops and conferences.

Across all seven colleges interviewees consistently viewed leadership as a vital ingredient and as one of, if not the most important aspect of college governance. Respondents' views about the vital importance of leadership were remarkably consistent. By contrast with Gemmill and Oakley's (1992) thesis that leadership is simply a way of placating followers' 'childlike' insecurities, our respondents emphasized the vital strategic, financial, organizational and motivational importance of effective leadership.

In relation to the question, 'What in your view constitutes effective leadership in this sector?' many respondents expressed a preference for open, engaged and collaborative practices. When describing their own approach, those in senior and middle leadership positions typically highlighted their preference for consultation and participation. However, while respondents preferred a consultative leadership style, they also valued leaders who were clear and decisive. They articulated a consistent preference for what we term 'blended leadership', a view that emphasizes the inter-relatedness of leadership behaviours often assumed to be incompatible dichotomies. Respondents frequently interpreted apparent dichotomies in heroic and post-heroic perspectives as mutually compatible and equally necessary for leadership effectiveness. To illustrate these themes, we now examine three inter-related dualities that consistently emerged in employees' views on effective leadership, namely respondents'

preference for both delegation and direction, both proximity and distance and both internal and external engagement.

Both delegation and direction

Across all seven colleges, interviewees stated that they wanted to be consulted and listened to, but they also valued clear and consistent direction from those in leadership positions. To most respondents, distributed leadership meant 'top-down' delegation rather than any alternative notion of 'bottom-up' engagement (which might be more prevalent in HE; see e.g. Bolden et al., 2009). Interviewees generally viewed this kind of distributed leadership very positively, as a means of enhancing team-working and employee commitment, but they also wanted leaders to provide direction, vision and clear expectations.

For example, a course manager in the Health and Beauty Division of one large FEC argued that the Principal's 'firm' leadership style was particularly valued:

Here we like a firm leadership approach. We like to know what has to be done and needs to be done. We like straight talking and the Principal is a very straight talker. Without strong management and leadership we would not know what we are doing. Honesty is the key thing. We like rigorous leadership. People like to know where they are. I give my staff a list of all their duties. Once they know what their roles and responsibilities are, they feel comfortable doing their job. So, clarifying what is expected of staff and creating the structures and conditions that allow them to perform their duties is absolutely essential.

As this respondent illustrates, clearly defined job tasks, reporting structures and decision-making processes were widely valued as a key to effective leadership. For those in less senior positions, ambiguity and uncertainty about responsibilities or direction (which respondents often associated with excessive delegation) could foster a lack of accountability, leading to unfair practices and mistrust. Indeed a number of respondents criticized leaders (mainly from past experience) who failed to clarify decisions and whose selection practices appeared to be unfair.

Employees at one particular college highlighted the current Principal's leadership style which combined delegation with decisive decision making. This college is one of the largest of its kind in post-16 UK education, attracting over 23,000 student enrolments per year and employing over 1000 staff. When the new Principal was appointed (four years earlier), the College was losing £2.25 million each year, and student retention and achievement rates were well below the national average. The College is now financially stable, student retention is high and results compare favourably with colleges around the country. In explaining this turnaround, the Principal pointed to the new culture of delegation:

This is a very large FE college. In fact, we've got faculties here that are bigger than some colleges so delegation is essential. It provides tremendous benefits. I'm not running all over the place. I trust people to do their job. Of course there are negatives. People at times step beyond their responsibility and sometimes they make mistakes, but it's important to support them when they do. We've got to help them to learn. In a college you've got to have people who can take

chances. That's the sort of person we want to nurture here. The key principle is that if you produce an initiative you get the credit. The worst situation, and the one I definitely do not want, is where the Principal gets all the credit for everything that's done in the college. I stay well away from that. If they get the credit then they will stay motivated.

College employees at various levels confirmed that, in contrast with the previous incumbent, the new Principal provided a sense of direction: 'The Principal gives direction by making decisions. He'll say, "This is where we're going. Now, how are we going to get there?"' (Lecturer). It was generally believed that the College turnaround was in large part due to the Principal's policy of combining delegation with direction and decisiveness, as a lecturer in the Education Department explained:

The Principal has built a reputation for delegation. He's well known for it. But there is a side to him that is also very firm. That's important too. If he says something is going to happen, it does happen. Somebody now is making decisions. Some decisions he has had to make are not very nice, but at least he made them. He grasped the nettle.

A lecturer in the Adult and Community Department also confirmed the positive impact of the Principal's blended leadership style:

He has created a delegating culture and this has given an immediate sense of stability across the college. His finger is on the pulse and he's well connected. He also has a strong moral conscience and is very approachable. He's always happy to go out for lunch but he does not have favourites. This is exactly what you need to be a good principal.

Interviewees confirmed that by combining delegation with direction, the Principal had facilitated a strong sense of community and a confident and motivated workforce.

Across all seven colleges employees expressed a preference for leadership that blends delegation and distribution with direction and decisive decision making. Underpinning this preference was another apparent dichotomy in relations between leaders and led, namely that between distance and proximity.

Both proximity and distance

In order to satisfy external assessors and to provide the clarity, consistency and fairness that employees value, structures and practices have to be relatively formal and impersonal. This in turn requires a degree of distance between leaders and led. However, our research revealed that the dominant workplace culture in all the FECs we researched was largely informal. In this context a detached and impersonal leadership approach could be ineffective and even counter-productive. Several respondents suggested that leaders who are perceived to be remote are unlikely to generate employee respect and trust.

Many interviewees stated that leaders need to be 'approachable' and able to communicate at all levels of the institution. They highlighted the need to 'value people' as a key aspect of effective leadership and as an essential precondition for enhancing employee morale and a sense of community. One repeatedly mentioned

example of how leaders could demonstrate approachability was through their willingness to be personally involved with specific tasks and available to help at critical moments, as one junior manager explained:

When there is a particularly difficult problem we are struggling with, it is important to know that people in leadership positions are willing to step in to help if we think it is necessary. Leaders need to be approachable and willing to help.

Several respondents stressed that one way leaders could 'value people' was by being available to assist staff with difficult issues. These views highlighted an unusual notion of leadership, one that is very operational and 'hands on'.

Principals also recognized their 'approachability' and its importance, as one stated,

To be liked is not important for this job but staff have got to feel they can approach you. You've got to be approachable. It really worries me when people are hiding information and not communicating with us. I say, 'Come on, why did you not say that?' I get really disappointed when people feel they can't say what they think is important.

Seeking to ensure his approachability, this Principal informed all colleagues that anyone could ask to see him at any time, and that they could bypass middle managers. He also organized regular meetings with all 65 managers in the college and held annual year-end meetings (in groups of ten) with all staff in the College, as he explained, 'this gives employees a chance of face-to-face discussions with me on any issue concerning the college'.

Many of the FE employees we interviewed expect those in senior positions to be visible, close to operational matters and willing to be involved in everyday college processes. The need for leaders to 'get their hands dirty' was very frequently mentioned as a prerequisite for establishing mutual trust and respect. This was especially the case with regard to the leadership qualities that women respondents considered very important. Stressing the importance of 'leading by example', women at various levels consistently stated that they would never ask anybody to do anything they would not do themselves, as one female middle manager stated: 'I would never ask my staff to do anything I would not do myself. There is no difference between me and the cleaner. I am prepared to do anything because I believe in the College and what we have to offer'. Women respondents considered it particularly important that those in senior positions are willing to undertake any task which they request of others. Similarly, students highlighted the informal college culture as a key reason why they had enrolled in FE (rather than a sixth form), because here they were 'treated like adults' (Collinson & Collinson, 2008).

The degree of distance and proximity between leaders and led is currently an important topic in leadership studies (e.g. Weibler, 2004). Much of the literature suggests that leaders need to retain a distance from followers (e.g. Antonakis & Atwater, 2002) and that this distance can take many different forms (e.g. psychological, social, hierarchical, physical and/or interaction frequency). Clearly, maintaining a degree of distance might assist leaders to focus on long-term strategic issues, retain confidential information and facilitate meritocratic decision making.

Yet, our findings indicate that, in a sector where informality is particularly valued, leaders who are deemed to be effective seek to maintain a balance in their dealings with staff between being distant enough (to see the bigger picture and provide direction) and close enough (to be approachable and assist with particular problems). Employees expect leaders to be flexible and able to shift between (degrees of) distance and proximity according to changing circumstances, demands and pressures. As Goffee and Jones (2006: 135) contend, effective leaders skilfully manage a forever shifting and paradoxical balance between distance and closeness.⁴

The repeated preference for leader approachability is an important feature of the informal culture in FE. Yet, while this expectation of approachability can facilitate internal collaboration, it can also create tensions and dilemmas because FE leaders are also required to be externally oriented, both in representing their organizations within the local community and in ensuring that colleges are accountable to various external funding and inspection bodies. These dual responsibilities of community representation and college accountability can reinforce senior leaders' concern to prioritize external matters, leaving internal issues to more junior colleagues. As the next section elaborates, retaining a balance between internal and external engagement can be extremely challenging.

Both internal and external engagement

FECs engage with multiple external stakeholders at a local and regional level (e.g. regional development agencies, training standards, sector skills councils, community organizations, local employers, local community leaders etc.) as well as with numerous national-level funding, auditing and inspection bodies. Consequently, leaders are required to be externally accountable to multiple stakeholders. For FECs, community engagement is increasingly vital, as one Principal emphasized:

In my first two years here, my role was very internal. I never set foot outside.

But it is more and more external, trying to locate the college as a big player in the local community. This is now really important.

Most respondents agreed that effective FE leaders need to develop an external presence. However, many also emphasized that this external engagement should not be at the cost of internal college matters. A number of interviewees were concerned that, in focusing on external issues, leaders could become too distant from equally important internal concerns.

For example, during his first year in post, one particular Principal invested a considerable amount of time trying to raise the profile of the College in the local and regional community. Prior to his appointment, the College had been struggling for several years and improving its external reputation was seen as a key part of the new Principal's remit. However, when a financial crisis developed within the College, the Principal was forced to redirect his energies and dedicate more attention to internal matters. In doing so he found it difficult to connect with staff, as he explained:

At Principal level, when you spend so much time out in the community, trying to raise the profile of the College you can lose touch with internal issues. I realized that, even when I was in the College, I was thinking about external issues. This

must have shown on my face as my secretary told me that, when I toured the College, I needed to relax and smile more. She explained that as I had been focused on external matters, the employees did not really know me, and although I was more visible now, when staff saw me I always had a really serious face and this led to anxiety within the College. I didn't realize such a small thing could affect staff so much! Just that little statement from my secretary has led me to really make an effort to engage with staff throughout the College in a more approachable way.

Trying to redress a previous imbalance (too internally focused), the present Principal had created the opposite imbalance (too externally focused).

Interviews with employees at this College confirmed that in his first 18 months in post, the Principal had been widely perceived to be rather detached. They also acknowledged that his subsequent efforts to connect with staff had produced positive results, as a lecturer confirmed:

We didn't have many dealings with the Principal at first, he was always out and about, but recently he has been much more visible in college. I used to think he was quite detached and severe but I think a lot of people are beginning to see another side to him. At a recent staff meeting he had some very supportive things to say about the College and he even cracked a few jokes. Although things are still difficult with the funding cuts, I know it made people feel he was more in touch with us all.

This case illustrates that when leaders become overly 'outward looking', they risk being seen by employees as remote and aloof. When employees believe that senior people are too externally focused, they can also begin to suspect that their leaders are mainly concerned with their own visibility and career.

Accordingly, retaining a balance between internal and external engagement was identified by many respondents as a key aspect of effective FE leadership. Such a balance is especially important given the high cultural value attributed by respondents in FE colleges to leader approachability. Yet, achieving and maintaining this kind of balance can be extremely challenging for those in senior positions particularly because of the numerous external funding and inspection processes to which colleges are now subject.

In recent years the nature and extent of external performance monitoring has intensified. Principals, heads of department and senior managers in all seven FECs consistently argued that the FE sector is over-regulated and that this multiplicity of targets and audits has now become excessive and counter-productive. While not opposed to targets per se, many saw the actual targets imposed as frequently unrealistic, inconsistent and/or contradictory, as one Principal observed:

Work in the post-16 education sector is driven by performance targets. One of the problems is that these different targets can be in tension with one another. Leaders and more junior staff alike are under intense pressure to achieve conflicting government targets. There is also so much time devoted to the data collection that drives the funding. The number of staff needed to service data collection is unbelievable.

Senior respondents acknowledged that the amount of staff needed to provide the detailed information to satisfy the 'audit culture' is very expensive and that much of this information is of little real value. Equally, many were frustrated by the perpetual changes they perceived in government education policies, as another Principal explained:

There are a lot of pressures from outside, a multitude of targets and at times, conflicting targets. There are real pressures to achieve phenomenal targets. Nobody objects to being accountable but this constant changing of the goalposts is very difficult. Funding regimes in FE are highly complex. If Government would just get off our backs for five minutes!

At the outset of this research project, we had assumed that FE leaders were empowered to lead their colleges. Yet, our research found that those in leadership positions frequently felt significantly constrained, and were widely perceived to be under intense, multiple pressures. We were struck by how often college leaders talked as if they were followers, required to adhere closely to government policy, rather than as leaders designing and implementing a strategic vision for their college.

Tight financial targets can also conflict with the traditional inclusive role of colleges as the providers of community-based learning opportunities. Our research suggests that, while formalized processes are designed to raise standards by increasing accountability and transparency, an excessive audit culture can have unintended and counter-productive effects that may erode the potential for effective leadership, reproducing a recurrent tension between (internal) approachability and (external) accountability.

In recent years there has been a significant reduction in the number of applicants for FE Principal vacancies. Many respondents from senior manager to lecturer level expressed the view that the role of Principal is now so demanding that this may be discouraging new applicants for senior positions, as one middle manager explained:

I could never do the Principal's job. It's so diverse. You have to know what goes on in the college, what is happening in the region, what is going on at a political level. You need to be out in the community, seen to be active at all levels within the college, keep up-to-date with the constant changes from the politicians, deal with all the Government bodies and manage the finances. It is an impossible job.

This statement graphically illustrates many employees' perceptions about the multiple external pressures experienced by FE leaders.

Our research suggests that FE employees expect those in leadership positions to be approachable yet also able to balance the external, multiple responsibilities of community representation and college accountability. It was important for respondents that, in their pursuit of external strategic positioning, leaders did not neglect important internal concerns. These findings suggest that a key challenge for FE leadership is to interact effectively with multiple communities in ways that retain a (perceived) balance between these diverse responsibilities.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted FE employees' preference for subtle and flexible practices that we have termed 'blended leadership': a way of understanding and enacting leadership in which apparently separate and incompatible dichotomies are re-evaluated as inter-related and mutually necessary. While heroic and post-heroic discourses on leadership are often seen as competing, our research suggests that many employees view them as complementary and mutually implicated in effective leadership. They preferred leadership practices that combine a paradoxical blend of seemingly irreconcilable qualities. Although employees across all seven colleges valued distributed and shared leadership, they also expressed a preference for aspects of more directive and 'firm' leadership, valuing leaders who were detached enough to appreciate the big picture, but also close enough to be approachable and 'down to earth'.

These findings suggest that FE leaders who are able to balance strategic priorities and competing responsibilities are most likely to be seen as enacting effective leadership and our study identified examples of such versatile practices in specific FECs. This is not, however, to suggest that blended leadership is invariably enacted in all FECs or that it constitutes 'a one best way' to lead. An important feature of such practices is their versatility. They are likely to take different forms and to shift according to specific circumstances and interpretations. Equally, we recognize that maintaining this kind of flexible approach is especially challenging in FE, particularly because of the multiple, shifting and sometimes contradictory (auditing) pressures in which colleges operate.

To what extent is our research on FE relevant to the study of the HE sector? As skilled knowledge workers, HE employees are expected to undertake research and scholarship and consequently enjoy comparatively greater 'academic freedom' than their FE counterparts. Accordingly, we anticipate that research studies examining HE employee perspectives on effective leadership could examine and reveal, for example, whether HE leaders are effective in balancing and combining competing strategic concerns. It is certainly possible that versatile and apparently paradoxical leadership practices might be evident in the HE sector where similar and different multiple demands and tensions also have to be addressed (e.g. those between competition/collaboration, external/internal engagement, managerialism/collegiality and growth/quality control). Although by no means as intense, short-term or turbulent as FE, external pressures on UK HEIs are also considerable.

Research by Bolden et al. (2008, 2009) in UK HEIs recorded similar employee responses in relation to preferred leadership approach. They found that while acknowledging that leadership was generally distributed, HE respondents also valued 'strong and inspiring leadership within the university'. Similarly, VCs talked about 'the constant juggling act' of balancing central direction with devolving responsibility. These findings suggest that if HE leaders are overly directive they may damage employee morale but if they are not directive enough they may be unable to ensure fair, lawful and consistent practices across the institution. Hence, the identification of salient tensions, contradictions and paradoxes as well as strategies for their resolution may be a relatively productive focus for researchers studying leadership in

HEIs (the growing literature on 'ambidexterity', which has considered universities, is also relevant here; e.g. Ambos et al., 2008).

A number of US studies suggest that this focus on paradoxical dichotomies and blended practices may also have a wider generalizability. For example, Collins (2001) found that organizations which had moved from 'good to great' over a 20-year period were run by 'level 5' leaders who were, paradoxically, modest yet wilful, humble yet fearless, resolute yet stoic. Cameron et al. (2006) argue that effective leaders tend to be 'simultaneously paradoxical', integrating factors usually seen as competing, contradictory and even incompatible. They encourage leaders to rethink apparent opposites by replacing 'either/or' with 'both/and' thinking. Kaplan and Kaiser (2003; see also Kaplan, 2006) argue that effective leaders are those who have the versatility to move freely between apparently opposing leadership practices. Highlighting the need for leaders to be both 'forceful' and 'enabling' and both 'strategic' and 'operational', they found that employees consistently regarded versatile managers as the most effective leaders in their organizations.

These arguments are also compatible with recent conceptual developments in leadership studies. A number of writers have criticized the rather simplistic dualistic assumptions found in much of the leadership literature (e.g. transformational/transactional, task/people orientation).⁵ Problematizing binaries such as organic/mechanistic and participative/autocratic, Fairhurst (2001) argues that the primary dualism in leadership studies is that between individual and collective forms of analysis. Bowring (2004) asserts that the binary opposition between leaders and followers is typically reinforced by a gender dualism in which men are privileged while women are marginalized. These arguments are supported by Gronn's (2008 and this issue) proposal for researchers to replace distributed leadership with a focus on 'hybridity'. Acknowledging that both individual and collective dimensions will invariably co-exist in leadership configurations, Gronn's notion of hybridity is very compatible with the blended leadership dynamics described here.

In sum, this growing conceptual interest in dialectical studies of leadership has led to alternative approaches being proposed that seek to address the dynamic tensions and interplay between seemingly opposing binaries. Drawing on our empirical research in FE, this article has sought to contribute to this growing interest in dialectical analysis by highlighting the potential value of exploring employee perspectives on effective leadership and blended leadership practices that can incorporate apparently irreconcilable opposites through a focus on paradox, multiplicity, ambiguity and inter-connectedness.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to all those in the FE sector who participated in the research. Thanks also to the reviewers for helpful suggestions on an earlier version of this article. Finally, we would also like to acknowledge The Centre for Excellence in Leadership for funding this project. All comments are the responsibility of the authors.

Notes

1. This is also the case in relation to research on the FE sector itself where, by comparison with schools and universities, FECs have received much less attention. Relatedly, there have been few studies of leadership in the FE sector.
2. Such arguments tend to treat followers as overly passive and unthinking.
3. Since this study was completed, we have conducted four further research projects in the FE sector, on governance, faith, employer engagement and self-regulation, using similar theoretical and methodological approaches in each case. Findings from these projects have tended to confirm those of the 'leader-led relations' research, from which this theme of blended leadership originally emerged.
4. Similarly, Axelrod (2000: 65) argues that the ability of Elizabeth I to combine 'the common touch with the air of leadership' was crucial to her maintenance of support: 'she combined an image of august majesty with a warm, common touch that created an instant and unbreakable bond with courtier and commoner alike'. He contends that this capacity to transcend distance by projecting humanity is an important aspect of effective leadership.
5. Dualistic discourses are by no means exclusive to leadership studies. Apparently opposing binaries can occur in many forms (e.g. rationality/emotion, public/private, theory/practice and micro/macro). Language itself embodies dualistic structures based on subject-object separations (e.g. 'leader' and 'follower'). Indeed while debates about dualism(s) are relatively recent in leadership studies they have a much longer history in social theory (see for example, the work of Plato, Hegel, Marx, Popper, Adorno and Derrida).

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