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Not your typical training programme: The Future Leaders Programme

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Introduction

When was the last time that a professional course really changed you? Sure, we all pick up tips at conferences and some workshops can really lead to a change in practice. But when was the last time you felt that a course had really changed *you*?

A course that changed me was the 2009/10 Future Leaders Programme (FLP), run by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.

Application

The Future Leaders Programme isn't like other librarianship courses I have undertaken.

For a start, you don't just pay your money and turn up. You need to apply for the course. The application includes some of the things you might expect – an up-to-date CV and a reference from your boss – but it also includes some more testing elements. You have to put together a 'statement of purpose' which covers your understanding of 'leadership' and why you want to go on the course. You also need to have a 'project', a pretty major activity in which you would be involved over the lifetime of the course that would stretch you as a leader – in my case developing the University of Warwick Library Academic Support Division to grow its service offering to meet the future needs of its user communities, in support of teaching and learning, and (most importantly) the University's evolving research ambitions. For me, this was an integral part of my development. As I later reflected in my Capstone Report: 'I believe I wouldn't have developed so far without the programme; I couldn't have developed so effectively without my project.'

The other part of the application was a telephone 'interview'. Again, this wasn't your usual interview. I was told within seconds that I had been successful and was on the programme. The real purpose of the interview was to see how I would respond to the nature of the course with questions about me – not my CV or my public persona – me. Who am I really? How do I feel about things? How do I feel I might change?

As I say, not your typical course.

Preparation for the programme

Before we began the course all the members of the cohort were registered on the programme's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and given a book review to write. This was partly to get us thinking about leadership. But it was also a tool to encourage teamwork, which was one of the key approaches of the programme: group activities were to be undertaken in learning triads, action learning sets and other groupings throughout the course.

The readings got us thinking about our understanding of leadership. More testing, we were also asked to think about our understanding of ourselves. We were sent various questionnaires to complete to obtain our Team Management Profile and ascertain our Window on Work Values, the outcomes of which would be revealed in Module 1.

Teaching Modules...

Over the year we undertook three modules covering three themes: you, your team and your organisation. These took place in the Moller Centre in Cambridge with each module covering 3-4 days and including some traditional lecture/workshops elements but mostly focusing on group activities and individual reflection.

Each of the module themes tied in with my project and my leadership journey.

Module 1 focused on developing a greater understanding of self. We were given the results of our Team Management Profile and the Window on Work Values questionnaires. Neither revealed any great surprises for me. I guessed I was a 'blue sky thinker' more concerned with people (empowerment, individualism and independence) than processes (compliance, authority and conformity). What was more interesting was how this was handled by the course leaders. Instead of leaving us each to reflect on our character we were all lined up in order of our 'scores' on various themes to explore different spectrums of behaviour. This showed that there is no one right way to lead and highlighted areas where we can all develop our skill sets, or at least ensure we surround ourselves with people more prone to providing these complementary skills.

Module 2 covered team relationships, which was especially important for my project as this (by then) involved reconfiguring my division and developing new teams within it. Module 3 looked to the wider context which again I found useful as my project was influenced partly by external drivers (the research agenda, scholarly communications developments, Web 2.0 opportunities) as well as new University strategic priorities.

...and the rest

But it would be wrong to portray the programme as merely ten long but enjoyable days spent in sunny Cambridge. The 'real' work of the course invariably took place over the other 355 days of the year. The project was – of course – non-stop but we were also directed to undertake other on-going developmental activities. These included readings (even the FLP has some traditional elements!), regular (virtual) contact with supportive triad groups and (physical) meetings with our action learning sets. We had to conduct a 360 degree review of our management style (twice – to identify developments over the year), carry out a PESTLE analysis of our sector and interview a leader who impresses us. We were also urged to keep a reflective diary.

Reflection

So, what are my reflections on the programme?

Structured programme

Although they did seem like large chunks of time to be away from the office, I found the modules (and their related activities) extremely useful. It was actually good to get substantial periods of time away from the workplace to reflect, become exposed to new ways of thinking and discuss my project and personal issues with fellow leaders.

Action Learning Set

I found the Action Learning Set to be an excellent way to explore ideas and concerns in a safe and supportive atmosphere. The team did take a while to 'perform' and really facilitate valuable learning conversations, but our later meetings were especially productive, with much effective inquiry and considerable insightful advocacy.

Triad

I particularly valued the work undertaken with my triad. Although setting up (and keeping to!) sessions proved difficult, the regular hour-long telephone meetings helped me to reflect and put problems into perspective, and consider the merits of various possible solutions. I also found I got support, reassurance and (on occasions) a much-needed 'virtual hug'.

Reflective Diary

Although I have undertaken reflective practice for many years, I do not routinely keep a diary and found it difficult to keep a reflective diary. Having said that, this has proved another useful discipline and it was invaluable to have a year-long overview to look back on to see how I have really developed during the lifetime of my project/the course.

Conclusion

At the end of the programme you are expected to put together a Capstone Report reflecting on your project, your journey. I found this a deeply personal and moving experience. I also found I was more than happy to share my reflections with my action learning set, which showed just what a journey we had taken together. Compiling the report also helped me to pull out themes. It made the elements of the programme click together: at last I really saw how textbook readings about 'defining moments' or 'tough empathy' linked to observations from the leader I interviewed and how this related to my project and myself. The twelve months have given me a greater understanding of what leadership really means, a greater understanding of the paths leaders need to travel and a greater understanding of myself and where I am on this journey.

So what next? For me, one of the most powerful stories in one of our central texts is the tale of the hermit cutting wood who knows he needs to sharpen his dull and rusty saw but instead focuses on the immediate need to cut

wood, albeit it slowly and ineffectively (1). I have benefitted from a structured development programme that has taken me away from the immediate demands of cutting wood. I now need to ensure that I continue to sharpen my saw rather than merely going back to focus on my piles of timber.

NOTES

1. Robert E. Quinn. *Deep change: discovering the leader within*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996, p.59-60

For more about the FLP see www.lfhe.ac.uk/support/flp