Developing public library managers as leaders: evaluation of a national leadership development programme

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Abstract

Purpose – Presents findings of the recent evaluation of the *Leading Modern Public Libraries* development programme with reference to the management versus leadership dynamic. The programme provided a strategic intervention to address a perceived weakness in leadership development within the public library sector in England. Drawing on recent examples from the literature, the theoretical differences between the concepts of management and leadership are discussed and used to inform consideration of the programme's effectiveness.
Methodology – Evaluation methods included participant observation, interviews, focus groups and a questionnaire survey, each administered at various stages of the programme with a representative sample of programme participants. Verbatim quotations from evaluation respondents are included in the analysis.
Findings – The research has revealed that the programme has had a positive impact in enabling and developing leadership capacity within the sector, particularly in terms of developing participants' confidence and other interpersonal traits associated with effective leadership, including creativity and risk-taking. Perceived benefits and limitations of the public library context in which the course was delivered have also been identified.
Practical implications – Important considerations on the transition from effective management to leadership, and the identification, support and development of future leaders within organisations are presented, with implications for current public library leaders, trainers and facilitators within the field.
Originality/value – The programme and its evaluation represented a strategic development initiative on an unprecedented scale in the public library sector.
Keywords Public libraries, Management, Leadership, Training, Staff development
Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In recent years, the leadership of public libraries has come to the forefront of the sector's strategic development and debate surrounding the future direction of the national public library service in the UK. Future recruitment, and the subsequent development, of effective leaders is indeed becoming a major *international* concern for the profession of librarianship. Statistical workforce studies in the United States indicate that of an approximate total of 136,000 librarians employed in US academic, public, school and special libraries, some 83,866 of those employees will have reached the age of 65 by 2010, with more than 50% of current library directors

retiring between 2002 and 2010 (Mason and Wetherbee, 2004). A study of leadership in Canadian libraries comments that leadership training and development has been relegated to 'the margins of human resource management' due to financial cutbacks, the elimination or merging of middle and senior management positions, and the subsequent limitations placed on the grooming and mentoring of future leaders (Ingles, 2003).

Similarly in the UK, concern has also been expressed about the lack of leaders, both actual and potential, in the public library profession and in other sectors of librarianship, including a shortage of candidates for director-level posts in higher education information services and relevant gaps in key generic skills (Corrall, 2002). Recent professional statistics have indicated that 29% of all public library staff in England are due to retire within the next 10 years and that 59% of English library authorities report difficulties in recruiting staff (MLA, 2005). Problems associated with the perceived leadership crisis include lack of staff time and other resources, levels of pay and status, work-related pressure and stress, and fragmented career paths. Usherwood et al (2001) identified a lack of leadership in the public library sector, and perhaps more notably, no (existing) identifiable way in which a new generation of public library leaders might be fostered. Of the sample studied, issues surrounding succession planning and career/leadership development were considered to be important themes for the profession, yet 'relatively few' authorities had begun to address such matters in practice.

Many internal and external challenges face the public library leader, suggesting that the political and social situational contexts in which public libraries operate are integral to their effective leadership. Tyree and Hansen (2001) describe a contemporary 'critically turbulent atmosphere' for public library administrators based on local government financial stringency, unbridled technological advances, increased user expectations and 'political doublespeak'. It is argued that the mission of the public library service can only be accomplished under circumstances where accountability and responsibility can be balanced with creativity and innovation.

Kent (2002) recognises the need for public libraries to 'realign their position in the information marketplace' in response to the cultural impact of technological development and the internet. For this purpose, public library leaders must be in a position of 'respect and credibility', and seen and valued as equals to other political, cultural and educational leaders in their respective communities and authorities. The contemporary public library leader must incorporate an ability and willingness to 'sell' the public service whilst maintaining credibility as a 'non-politicised individual in a politicised environment', balancing commercial expertise, political acumen and a service to the 'public good'.

Mullins and Linehan (2006) conclude that the 'effectiveness or success of senior librarians is not dependent upon status or position in their organizational structure but rather on their leadership, charisma, and ability to mobilize constituencies', and advocate the 'centrality' of leadership for optimal strategic and operational practices in public libraries. The focus away from 'status or position' is advocated by Hernon et al. (2003), who recommend a focus on leadership potential, including the identification of leadership skills and attributes amongst existing staff to inform effective succession planning strategies.

In response to this perceived leadership crisis, *Framework for the Future* (DCMS, 2003), the government's strategic vision for the public library service, prioritises the development of 'a new generation of library leaders fully trained in business management and marketing skills' (p. 20), and 'stronger sectoral leadership at national and regional level' (p. 43), including the 'creation of a national leadership training programme' (p.46). Within this context, this paper reviews recent literature on theories and models of leadership, with a particular focus on distinctions drawn between leaders and managers and the progression of individuals from management to leadership, including examples of leadership development initiatives in the library and information services domain. It then briefly describes the strategic intervention taken in the UK by the national Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) in partnership with the Society of Chief Librarians (SCL) to address leadership development in the public library sector, before reporting key findings of an independent multi-method evaluation of the intervention's effectiveness.

Distinguishing leadership from management: the theoretical context

> "Good leadership overlaps with, but is different from, good management. Management efficiency and effectiveness have long been the hallmarks of organizational success; but this is no longer enough. Something else is needed".
> (Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell, 2004, pp. vii)

The concepts of management and leadership, and the distinction between the two, have been widely discussed by professionals and theorists in the field. As suggested in the quotation above, the individual concepts can overlap in practice and there is a view that the two are not mutually exclusive. When seeking to differentiate between management and leadership, the literature reveals a number of different definitions. Management is perceived as being the practice of dealing with rules, constructs and guidelines; leadership with vision, action and direction (Tyree and Hansen, 2001). Mason and Wetherbee (2004) observe that management is about *what* things get done, leadership is about *how* things get done; management involves accomplishing tasks, leadership involves influencing and guiding a course of action.

The inference that leaders require vision and direction, and the ability to influence and guide, suggests that effective leaders have more sophisticated personality characteristics. Adair (2003) discusses leadership as an art form, as compared to the science of management. As such leadership is associated with personality and vision, management with methods, routine and structure. Management is essentially therefore a form of business administration; personal attributes associated with leadership, such as creativity, are the 'added value' that leadership brings to management (Adair, 2005, p. 62).

Thomas (2004) lists five distinctive leadership nuances supposedly 'not found in management' including the necessity to give direction, provide inspiration, build teams, set an example and be accepted (p. 119). Whilst the ability to give direction and build teams are arguably also management traits and responsibilities, providing an example of the practical overlap between the two concepts, the remaining three nuances described by Thomas again relate to an individual's personality and their

interpersonal relationships with others. Leigh and Maynard (2003) define two types of leadership; 'enabling' and 'inspirational'. The former is again described as more of a management trait, and is associated with operational roles at junior and middle management level. Enabling leaders are thus described as supporters, facilitators and motivators. Inspirational leaders on the other hand lead via personality and behavioural traits that are less prescribed, such as likeability, integrity and initiative. This presents the theory that the *charisma* of individuals is therefore vital to their success as leaders.

Brown (2000) further develops the charisma theory by presenting six dynamics of leadership that consider the leader as:

   1) hero;
   2) actor;
   3) immortalist;
   4) power broker;
   5) ambassador; and
   6) victim.

Immortalists for example are visionary leaders 'whose high self esteem and desire to succeed stands as a beacon to their followers' (Brown, 2000, p. 69). Humility is also discussed by Brown (2000, p. 156) as an attractive trait in leaders, as 'victim-learners' become successful leaders in demonstrating 'how to make a virtue of the errors they commit… in ways which neutralize organizational tensions, reduce follower hostility, and even strengthen their authority'.

Advanced creativity, innovation and risk taking are also perceived to be key leadership skills and abilities, which can be linked to an individual's personality and behavioural patterns. Cartwright (2002, p. 116) describes several, incremental, differences between managers and leaders, including suggestions that the leader innovates where the manager administers; the leader originates where the manager copies others; and the leader challenges where the manager accepts convention. The leader therefore in this example adopts higher levels of creativity and risk taking. Sloane (2007) advocates innovation as the main distinction between managers and leaders, stressing that successful and competitive organizations are lead by people who encourage a culture of creativity, enterprise, risk taking and inclusion.

Can we teach managers to be leaders?
If effective leadership is dependent upon the personality traits and characteristics of individual leaders themselves, this presents an interesting challenge for organisations seeking to develop future leaders from amongst existing management cohorts, and for trainers charged with this responsibility. McCartney and Campbell (2006, p. 191) suggest that, within the management versus leadership debate, 'one construct is a subset of the other such that one individual could possess both leadership and management skills'.

According to Adair (2003) the transformation of managers into leaders occurs when the manager is able to conduct organisational change via the promotion of shared vision and values, in what becomes a strategic belief system. This requires managers with the ability to take risks and influence others. Fisher and Sharp (2004)

recommend a 'lateral leadership' model as an effective method for identifying managers with such traits, which encourages the development of leadership skills at all levels of the organization, based on the principles of team problem solving and shared responsibility. Sarros et al (2006) describe leaders of organisations as people who get things done through others, and manifest a vision for the organisation through interpersonal strengths, change imperatives and strategic initiatives.

When seeking to effect organisational change and the development of a shared strategic vision, it is argued that leaders cannot rely solely on their personality and powers of persuasion; a high degree of political acumen and knowledge and understanding of the context in which organizations operate is also required. Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell (2004) include a 'characteristics' dimension, but also give equal weight to 'challenges' and 'context' with their three-domain model of leadership. They observe that leadership development programmes often focus upon personal characteristics and neglect the situational context in which leaders operate, and the actions required to face given situational challenges. Borgelt and Falk (2007, p. 125) argue that effective leadership is not in fact based on the attributes of an individual leader, but 'the collective leadership intervention required in purposeful events in order for them to be accomplished'.

Within the library and information services domain, various initiatives have been taken to stimulate leadership development, notably leadership 'institutes', which are typically intensive, multi-day, residential programmes combining conceptual models, diagnostic activities and practical skill-building with peer networking and coaching or mentoring. Mason and Wetherbee (2004) analyse more than 30 programmes of this type launched over the last 20 years mostly by national and state library associations, the majority initiated in the mid to late 1990s. Among the best known are the Snowbird Leadership Institute in the United States aimed at new managers and the Aurora and Northern Exposure Institutes in Australian and Canada respectively, both modelled on the American programme; other well-established programmes include several serving the academic sector, such as the the Association of College and Research Libraries/Harvard Graduate School of Education Leadership Institute, EDUCAUSE/Frye Leadership Institute and the National Library of Medicine/ Association of Academic Health Science Libraries Leadership Fellows Program (Corrall, 2002).

Leadership development provision in the UK can be traced back to a two-week cross-sectoral strategic management residential sponsored by the British Library in the 1990s, which eventually led to a modified programme for the higher education sector managed by SCONUL – the Society of College, National and University Libraries (Noon, 1997). SCONUL's latest initiative is its Future Leaders programme for library and IT staff, run in partnership with other bodies in the sector; and it is pertinent to note here that the rationale for this programme 'is based on the assumption that excellent leadership cannot be taught but can be learned' (Stevenson, 2006, p. 19). Despite their longevity and popularity, such leadership programmes have been criticised for their short-term nature and failure to cover the knowledge, understanding and skills needed to lead change in complex digital environments in sufficient breadth and depth: Hernon and Schwartz (2006) argue for a more 'cohesive' and comprehensive approach, represented by the new PhD in Managerial Leadership in the Information Professions developed by Simmons College.

Leadership models and the transformational leader
The transformational leadership model combines the charismatic virtues of the effective leader with other desired criteria such as political acumen and strategic vision. Leadership theorists, as well as describing the behavioural traits of individual leaders, have developed and defined a number of leadership models which help us to understand the phenomenon and differentiate it from management skills and techniques. These include for example transactional leadership, whose advocates choose to motivate followers by inspiring a vision of what is to be accomplished, in an approach that is task oriented, and facilitated by the ability to obtain results, solve problems, plan and organise (Mason and Wetherbee, 2004), and the emotional intelligence model of leadership (Goleman, 2000).

Dulewicz and Higgs (2005) discuss the growing significance of emotional intelligence when considering the future study of the field, particularly with reference to the relationship between leadership and organisational behaviour. New emotional and social paradigms of leadership include self-awareness; emotional resilience; intuitiveness and interpersonal sensitivity. Emotional maturity is also cited as a key competency within the trait theory debate, and is considered to be a key attribute of effective individual leadership (Maurik, 2001). This model is also attracting attention in the library sector: for example, Hernon and Rossiter (2006) have identified the traits associated with emotional intelligence and suggested those that are most important for library leaders, which follows on from a UK investigation of emotional intelligence in relation to contemporary public library leadership (Roberts, 2002).

The organisational approach has been championed by private sector consultancies (Tate, 2003) as a holistic alternative to training programmes targeted towards the development of the individual leader. The organisational model is associated with collective team leadership and linked to innovation and ideas within an organisational context, perceiving leadership itself as a component in the organisational system. By treating leadership in this manner, rather than as a process of individual training and development, it is argued that greater acknowledgement can be made of the social context within which an organisation operates, and of the organisational objectives within that society. Designed to help develop a 'robust leadership strategy', the approach incorporates the following key themes: responses to external environment; mapping of the organisational context; identification of appropriate leadership culture; attaining leadership competence; managing leadership throughout the organisation.

Transformational leadership involves a more empathic, empirical approach, as leaders engage 'not only the heads but also the hearts of others' (Mason and Wetherbee, 2004) in seeking to establish and support organisational *change* and development. The transformational model is similar in approach to the organisational theory, but places a greater emphasis on the emotional capacity of the individual to inspire organisational leadership. The transformational leader is an effective agent of change, who thinks beyond the conventional bounds of the immediate situation and identifies opportunities for growth and increased effectiveness (Maurik, 2001). Transformational leadership seeks to motivate others by appealing to higher ideals and moral values, with the relevant leaders being expected to create a sense of trust, incorporating long-term vision, empowerment and coaching. James MacGregor Burns (quoted in Baughman et al, 2004) describes transformational leadership as follows:

> "Transformational leadership occurs, when in their interactions, people 'raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality. Their purposes, which might have started out as separate but related, as in the case of transactional leadership, become fused… But transforming leadership ultimately becomes moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspirations of both the leader and the led, and thus it has a transforming effect on both'."

Dulewicz and Higgs (2005) describe the transformational model as the 'dominant approach to studying leadership'. Recent research conducted by key proponents and analysts of the transformational model (Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2005) reports a new paradigm in transformational leadership which challenges 'heroic' approaches to leadership and focuses on the development of the individual within an organisational context. Using a UK sample of NHS managers at all levels, the most important aspect of transformational leadership was revealed to be 'valuing others' (represented by genuine concern for others' well-being and development). Integrity was also regarded as an important contextual leadership variable in accordance with the public sector service ethic.

Leading Modern Public Libraries

The Leading Modern Public Libraries (LMPL) programme is a key component of the action plan to implement the DCMS (2003) *Framework for the Future* strategy. The programme is of significant importance for public libraries in seeking to address the perceived weakness in leadership development within the sector. The response provided through the LMPL programme was proportionate to the issue in providing the largest and most sustained leadership development intervention in public libraries ever attempted in the UK.

Following a successful pilot phase, the programme was rolled out between April 2005 and March 2006 to all 149 public library authorities (PLAs) in England by FPM, an independent training organisation, which was commissioned to undertake this work by MLA in partnership with SCL. The programme offered one place to each authority at each of three programme delivery levels:

1) heads of service;
2) senior managers; and
3) future leaders.

LMPL was delivered via a series of residential workshops, including three modules for Senior Managers and Heads of Service, but only two modules for Future Leaders. The programme structure was based on the transformational leadership model and included the use of a 360° appraisal tool, the Transformational Leadership Questionnaire (TLQ – developed by Beverley Alimo-Metcalfe of Leadership Research and Development Limited[1]), although this was limited to the two senior levels.

The specific objectives of the LMPL programme, derived from *Framework for the Future* (DCMS, 2003), were to build librarians' capacity to improve services through better quality of leadership, and particularly to equip staff with the skills to deliver a

clear vision for service improvement and with new business management and marketing skills.

The programme aimed to give participants an opportunity to:

- Strengthen their skills and capacity to deliver transformational change for their authority and public library services
- Learn and develop alongside colleagues from other authorities who shared similar levels of responsibility
- Formulate action plans for their self-development as leaders.

As indicated above, in addition to the ambitious scale of the programme, it was distinctive in explicitly incorporating an *organisational approach* to leadership development (by offering three places for each library authority at different levels of the organisation) and also by formally including *management skills* within its scope (to fulfil the requirements set out in *Framework for the Future* (DCMS, 2003).

The programme evaluation

The external evaluation of the programme, commissioned by MLA, was conducted between January 2005 and June 2006 by a team of researchers from the *Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society* (CPLIS)*,* University of Sheffield and *Information Management Associates* (IMA). As such, the evaluation was designed to measure the short-term impact of the programme only.The research team recognised this limitation and in its formal report to the LMPL Steering Group recommended further evaluation of the programme (and any subsequent roll-out) on an ongoing longitudinal basis, by monitoring selected participants over a five to ten year period. The recommendation also suggested that 'such evaluation should include all key stakeholders, including local and national government representatives and decision-makers, in order to establish the political and cultural impact of the programme as a "strategic intervention"' (Streatfield et al, 2007, p. 62).

Previous research on library leadership programmes has highlighted the need for more rigorous evaluation, particularly longitudinal studies. Mason and Wetherbee (2004) comment specifically on the lack of published value and impact studies, despite the proliferation of programmes and discussion of intervention strategies in the literature. Pors (2005) reports that a state-sponsored leadership course for public library managers in Denmark improved their confidence and knowledge of management tools, but his study was conducted on a relatively short-term timescale. Zauha (2007, p. 6) also comments on evaluation problems: '…thorough assessments or evaluative studies may not be undertaken at all, or data is only partially collected and digested before funding or momentum runs out, or their results are not reported in the literature'. She describes how the Pacific Northwestern Librarian Association has introduced a more extensive ongoing evaluation cycle for its Library Leadership Institutes, which includes immediate feedback at the event, followed by online surveys of participants after 2 months, 22 months and 38 months (Zauha, 2007). However, the profession continues to lack conclusive evidence of programme impacts on participants and services in the longer term.

Evaluation research methodology
A variety of research methods was used, including the following key data collection exercises:

- *Module observation and follow-up events:* the participant observation method was employed in this longitudinal element of the evaluation, beginning with observation of the actual programme at all three levels, followed by an organised event for each of the relevant cohorts, 6-9 months after completion of the programme. Both quantitative and qualitative observation tools were used during this phase of the evaluation, including focus group sessions during the follow-up events.

- *Mid-programme interviews:* telephone interviews were conducted at the mid-programme stage to collect qualitative data on how participants were responding to the programme as the course progressed.

- *Critical incident interviews:* telephone interviews were also conducted with a critical incident focus after completion of the course, to examine the extent to which the programme was being applied by participants in the workplace.

- *Pre- and post-programme questionnaires:* the questionnaire survey method was used to facilitate another longitudinal approach to programme evaluation, collecting both quantitative and qualitative 'before and after' data concerning participants' perceptions of the impact and appropriateness of the programme.

A different cohort of LMPL participants was used as a research sample for each stage of the evaluation, but with every exercise covering all three levels of the programme (i.e. Heads of Service, Senior Managers and Future Leaders). All respondents were assured complete anonymity by the research team and individuals were not named personally or by library authority within evaluation reports; verbatim quotations have been used here and in the full project report (Streatfield et al, 2007), with respondents identified by their programme level and the cohort used for each stage of the evaluation as follows:

- Observation and follow-up event participants: cohorts A
- Mid-programme interview respondents: cohorts B
- Critical incident interview respondents: cohorts C
- Pre and post-programme questionnaire respondents: cohorts D

Evaluation findings
An edited summary of LMPL evaluation findings is discussed below under the following headings, with a particular focus on the management versus leadership dynamic and points identified in the review of leadership theories:

- Understanding and enabling leadership capacity
- Encouraging creativity and innovation
- The public library context
- Factors affecting the impact of the programme

Understanding and enabling leadership capacity

From a transitional perspective, respondents reported an increased awareness and understanding of their own leadership capabilities as a result of attending the programme. A recurring theme was improved confidence of participants, both in realising their own potential as leaders and feeling more assured in their existing leadership styles and approaches:

> "I feel the main benefit of the programme for me has been that I now recognise my own abilities in a more realistic way – I have always underestimated myself and the contribution I can make and this has been a huge boost to my confidence and has enabled me to trust my own judgement much more than before" (Senior Manager: cohort D)

> "It's not changing the way I practice leadership, more confirming that what I was already doing was right… so it's making me more confident in what I do" (Future Leader: cohort B)

One respondent even at the mid-programme stage recognised their own ability to develop from a managerial to a leadership role, and how the skills that they had previously used to manage under another person's direction could be applied to develop their own autonomous leadership style:

> "Previously I was confident in applying my style on behalf of my leader… now I'm becoming more confident in becoming a leader myself, and this is important not just for me but for my organisation as a whole" (Senior Manager: cohort B)

The course had also encouraged the development of other interpersonal skills considered to be vital for the effective leader, including qualities associated with *emotional intelligence,* such as the desire and ability to generate enthusiasm within teams, to show sensitivity to others and consider the impact of their own behaviour. Attendance has also challenged perceptions, and perhaps stereotypes, of leaders, enabling participants to consider how their own personalities and characteristics translate to leadership:

> "The course was brilliant in its content and also in its ability to enthuse future leaders. I will certainly put the skills learnt in to practice, but felt the enthusiasm created by the course, for myself and my team, was extremely beneficial" (Future Leader: cohort D)

> "The ideas presented were much more 'hands on' and softer than the way I would normally do things – it has encouraged me to think about the impact of my actions and behaviour" (Senior Manager: cohort D)

> "I was encouraged to find that leadership does not necessarily mean loud and in your face, which I most definitely am not" (Future Leader: cohort D)

Even participants at the Head of Service level have benefited in terms of their interpersonal relationships with peers; one participant had applied a technique learnt on the programme to great effect:

> "[I have used] the Four Domains [exercise]… in discussion with my line manager. This is a difficult relationship… it offered a focus for really constructive discussion… we worked out issues. She recognised the source of these [issues] and can [now] support me; e.g. practical ways to engage elected members" (Head of Service: cohort C)

The course was able to facilitate such changes in attitude and personal realisation amongst participants by providing the time and space away from the workplace to consider and reflect. This was cited as one of the main benefits by many respondents. It could be argued that managers with the genuine ability to lead should not require training to do so, but clearly a programme of this nature has been beneficial in providing the psychological break from day-to-day routine and pressures, the opportunity to be inspired by others and to focus:

> "So far it has been useful and provided essential thinking and planning time" (Senior Manager: cohort D)

> "[I] found it useful, mainly because of the space and time for thought and reflection that it gave away from the workplace rather than because of the specific content. I think this will be the main benefit for me" (Senior Manager: cohort D)

> "I am… benefiting from being part of such an interested, supportive and enthusiastic group led by facilitators who obviously know their stuff and manage to convey ideas with humour and enthusiasm!" (Senior Manager: cohort D)

Evaluators were initially concerned at the start of the project about the focus of the programme on one particular model of leadership, in this case, the transformational model. As part of the evaluation respondents were asked to give their response to and opinion on the value of the model itself. The perceived benefits of the transformational model as presented by LMPL include the ability to facilitate improved communication within organisations; the encouragement of a more open, participative culture; change management and staff motivation. Wilderom (1991) considers inclusive and participative organisational cultures to be integral to the effective leadership and management of service-sector organisations. The majority of respondents perceived the model to be appropriate for the contemporary public library service and the political climate of local government, particularly with its focus on leading through change:

> "A lot has already been done to equip a transformational ethos around the place… so most of the methods will fit… generally it fits quite well with what's happening corporately" (Head of Service: cohort B)

> "I see lots of opportunities to apply the training at the moment in terms of taking people through change… staff cuts, building renovation… we really have to look at individual role, purpose and motivation, getting staff on board and developing team skills… some of the exercises will be useful" (Future Leader: cohort B)

Some respondents articulated themselves the need and the increased ability to lead rather than manage, including the desire and intention to lead a change in management style within their own library service, and in turn encouraging a sense of lateral leadership within the organisation as advocated by Fisher and Sharp (2004):

> "…an insight into how to lead without managing." (Future Leader: cohort C)

> "What I'm trying to do is change the ethos in the library service management style… there's a history of top down management and that's not really the way I work. I want people to take responsibility and ownership of things" (Senior Manager: cohort B)

Encouraging creativity and innovation

A large proportion of the residential programme was dedicated to sessions on creativity, including a number of practical team exercises, techniques and toolkits, which were provided to be 'taken away' by participants for use within their own organisations and with own teams. The observation fieldwork revealed that responses to and engagement with the various techniques at all three levels were inconsistent, which is perhaps to be expected with a programme of this scale. Levels of engagement were influenced by personal taste, or previous experience of using them before. Those respondents that reacted positively to the sessions have benefited from gaining new ways of approaching things, and challenging their conventional approaches:

> "The course supported my leadership style – collecting all the information, and using flexibility and being empathetic, but it also provided supporting skills relating to creativity and a more dynamic approach" (Future Leader: cohort D)

> "It took me out of my nice little comfortable environment." (Future Leader: cohort C)

Heads of Service in particular responded well to the creativity sessions, and identified ways to use the techniques in their own service(s). Their potential impact in terms of encouraging engagement amongst and within teams, and including staff was perceived to be particularly useful, giving the sessions a positive leadership spin. The advanced sessions on risk taking for the senior levels of the programme also had a strong impact, and have encouraged advanced leadership capacity:

> "I'm now seeing risk as positive and creative rather than managing the risk out of situations." (Head of Service: cohort C)

> "We've just undertaken a large consultation exercise with customers and non-customers… identifying focus groups, sending out a questionnaire… we're in the process of analysing the findings and coming out with a way forward… I'll be using the thinking hat technique within that… it will encourage staff to think in a different way and be more open-minded" (Head of Service: cohort B)

> "I've certainly learnt new ways to approach certain situations… I found the content on releasing creativity in your teams very useful" (Head of Service: cohort B)

The public library context

Participants appreciated the fact that the programme was designed specifically for public library staff, as opposed to being a generic leadership development programme. The ability to spend time and network with peers and like-minded professionals from the same sector was seen as a real advantage. The context for the creativity sessions amongst others was grounded in challenges and issues facing the public library service; for example, participants would be asked to address a particular public library-based problem with each of the techniques and exercises. Participants thought that this gave the programme a 'real world' grounding and relevance to them:

> "After the first session I felt quite negative [it overlapped with previous management courses]… But the second session was very good – providing the context of Framework for the Future and it made it more relevant to the library environment and local government culture." (Future Leader: cohort C)

> "The longest period I've spent thinking and engaging with a peer group since I qualified - invigorating." (Senior Manager: cohort C)

> "To meet other Heads from elsewhere in the country and to share skills and problems – to learn from one another" (Head of Service: cohort B)

Whilst the applied practical problem-solving techniques were considered to be useful, some respondents at the senior levels felt that the programme fell short of addressing the wider strategic and political issues facing the public library service as part of local government structures, an important contextual responsibility for the sector's leaders. It was felt that although the programme began to discuss this area towards the end, a greater emphasis on political leadership was required, particularly as many Senior Managers and Heads of Service were already aware of the (what were perceived as essentially) management techniques, which took up a large proportion of the programme:

> "… a greater focus on strategic leadership and the bigger picture in terms of regional objectives and how to consolidate the public library's role and future within the authority. It is a constant battle!" (Senior Manager: cohort D)

> "I felt the most useful parts... i.e. thinking strategically, were too near the end of the programme. I felt things were just getting challenging as the course finished" (Senior Manager: cohort D)

Factors affecting the impact of the programme
Any training programme of this nature will only be successful if the 'right' people attend. The evaluation of LMPL revealed some concerns about the selection processes within public library authorities, and the consequent suitability of some nominations. This was a particular issue with the Future Leaders programme. It was noticeable during the observation fieldwork that some of the participants did not quite 'fit' the expected profile of a Future Leaders group, and this was confirmed by informal conversations with some members. The average age of participants, for example, was considerably higher than expected. (One participant was about to retire!) The futility of attendance was noted by some respondents, with one requesting a greater emphasis on succession planning and the development of future leaders:

> "I expected people in their 20s, the majority were my age or older. I'm not really sure where the new leaders are coming from." (Future Leader: cohort C)

> "There needs to be a greater focus on how to develop leaders within the organisation – I can't help but feel it is a little too late to be focussing on current Heads of Service!" (Head of Service: cohort D)

Matched to this problem, it was noted by both respondents and evaluators that the allocation of one place at each level of the programme for every public library authority, irrespective of size or profile was insufficient. It was felt in particular that the application of the programme would be more effective if more people from each authority could attend:

> "A challenge will be convincing people of the value of what we're doing. I know certain people will think "oh she's been away on another course then" and will be sceptical about some of the exercises if/when I try to use them. This could have been avoided by letting more people from individual authorities attend the course… it's difficult to persuade

people of the value of something that they haven't been involved in" (Senior Manager: cohort B)

In fact, the programme was subsequently extended, with 663 staff having participated by July 2007 (Wilkie, 2007).

Whilst some respondents recognised the leadership, as opposed to management, content and values of the course, other participants at the senior levels felt that the focus was too managerial, and similar to other more generic management training programmes. These opinions were linked to those criticising the low political and strategic content of the programme. One critic was very cynical about the impact of management theory on the development of leaders; another felt that the preoccupation with management-based techniques was a waste of time, when a greater focus on the TLQ exercise (360° appraisal tool) would have been more beneficial:

> "Some of the course content was more management orientated than leadership… and related to what many of us have already heard or experienced. I am very sceptical about the value of such management theory… I have experience of colleagues returning from training spouting jargon but with no clue about how to actually relate to people and motivate and lead them" (Senior Manager: cohort D)

> "It hasn't really taught me anything I didn't know before in terms of management theory and practice: there was a little too much time spent on tools and processes that are familiar to existing managers. The main benefit for me has been the time to focus on me as a leader and what I need to do to progress – the TLQ namely was highly beneficial, and I would have welcomed more time on this" (Senior Manager: cohort D)

Conclusion

The evaluation of the Leading Modern Public Libraries programme has shown evidence of success in enabling and developing leadership capacity amongst participants, particularly with reference to building confidence in and awareness of their own leadership abilities and potential. The programme has also assisted the development of other less tangible interpersonal traits and abilities, such as qualities associated with emotional intelligence, creativity and risk taking; such attributes, as the literature suggests, are central in distinguishing the concept of leadership from management, and in developing successful managers as effective leaders.

Such transitional development however, is entirely dependent on the identification and selection of the right people, which from an organisational perspective includes succession planning strategies and a culture of lateral leadership throughout the organisation. The use of the transformational leadership model has enabled participants in some cases to think laterally, and to encourage a more open, participative and inclusive culture at work. The evaluation revealed some issues however, particularly at the Future Leader level, concerning the inappropriate recruitment and selection of course participants. This has been a major failing with respect to the attitude towards the programme from some public library authorities, and with the administrative processes involved, which has undoubtedly affected the impact of the programme at some levels.

The representation of leadership versus management on the programme has been quite contentious. On an individual level, as already discussed, participants were encouraged to develop a greater cognitive understanding of their leadership abilities, and given practical, creative tools to help apply such abilities in the workplace. Some of these tools however were considered to be too managerial by the more experienced and senior course participants, who would have preferred a greater focus on the political acumen required to lead public libraries. This suggests that the course could have been tailored to greater effect depending on participant level and prior experience, and that a wider consideration of the contextual issues facing public library leaders was required.

As a strategic intervention, the programme has undoubtedly proven to be successful in drawing attention to the role of leadership in public libraries, and making both individual practitioners and services as a whole more aware of their leadership needs and priorities. Subsequent contact with participants by the evaluation team has revealed that many have taken on new roles with additional strategic responsibilities since completing the programme. Having a specific programme aimed only at public librarians has been particularly beneficial, but has not provided a quick-fix solution. It is now essential for the sector that PLAs themselves adopt and continue this ethos within and across their own organisations, and dedicate intellectual space and time to the continued development of future leaders.

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[1] Now the Real World Group. http://www.realworld-group.com/aboutus.asp