Process to Practice: The role of the middle manager in English Further Education

Peter Wolstencroft – Coventry University (corresponding author – ac3430@coventry.ac.uk)
Catherine Lloyd – Bedford College

Abstract

The English Further Education sector has undergone significant change since the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) encouraged a culture of entrepreneurship, competition and the use of what was seen as best practice from the commercial sector. This led to a cultural shift and the introduction of many new initiatives, a situation that still exists now. The implementation of these initiatives was often left to middle managers, a group of people who occupied the gap between the senior leaders and the lecturers in the classroom. Current austerity measures, restructuring and the shift towards the creation of larger organisations, has resulted in reorganisations that could present opportunities for middle managers to participate in the strategic processes and leadership of the organisation further developing their role. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the leadership and management aspects of the middle manager's role. Whilst many managers in the sector are reluctant to identify as leaders (Briggs, 2006) our research shows that they are undertaking a range of activities that could be classified as leadership. We suggest that using 'practice' rather than 'process' as a descriptor of the role would reframe, identify and bring forward the leadership aspects of what they do. Encouraging a focus on a holistic, practice based approach, rather than a succession of process driven tasks, could help managers to perform their role more effectively. Findings taken from interviews with thirty-two participants and a questionnaire with 302 responses are used to illustrate our argument.

Introduction

The purpose and scope of the English Further Education sector can be hard to define, especially given the fluid nature of policy in the area (Randle and Brady, 1997; Spenceley, 2007). Yet when you dig below the surface, what emerges is a sector that is both resilient and responsive (Daley et al., 2015). This sector which may be defined in England as encompassing '…any study taken after the age of 16 that is not part of higher education (that is, not taken as part of an undergraduate or post-graduate degree)' (BIS, 2016: 5), in size and scope equates to over 4 million learners in 1,150 institutions and a budget of around £10 billion (BIS, 2016).

The sector has changed considerably in the last 25 years. The primacy of the economic imperative (Hyland and Merrill, 2003), which was at the heart of the incorporation of colleges in 1992, changed the fundamental nature of Further Education. This has been defined as the belief in '…the efficacy of the free market' (Simmons, 2008b: 429) and is characterised by neo-liberalist principles of free enterprise, free market and the measurement of success in quantitative terms (Simmons, 2008a). The impact of neo-liberalism on education has meant that the freedom of the individual organisation to pursue their own aims and objectives has been accentuated (Mahony and Weiner, 2017) leading to a focus on competition and the achievement of key performance indicators as well as an increasing input from external stakeholders such as employers (Gleeson et al, 2015), a process that can be likened to managerial positivism (Walby, 2003). This, in turn, has led to a significant change in role for those charged with leading and managing within the sector. This change has meant that the production of quantitative data to prove that targets have been achieved, has become a key focus for the middle manager, whilst the educational imperative has declined in perceived importance (Avis et al., 2003).

Middle managers are a diverse group of people situated in the organisation between senior managers and teaching staff (Busher et al., 2007) who have been given some form of delegated responsibility for which they are directly accountable (Turner, 2007). This group have moved beyond their traditional role as the 'ideological buffer between senior leaders and lecturers through which market reform is filtered in the FE workplace' (Gleeson and Shain, 1999: 462) to one which requires them to coordinate a multitude of tasks whilst being held accountable for the performance of their department. Incorporation, the rise of neo-liberalism and managerialism, numerous reorganisations and constant policy initiatives have created a job that epitomises the concept of 'managing under pressure' (Drodge, 2002: 27). These individuals hold critical roles for engaging staff in change, securing consistently good performance and generating creative and adaptable solutions (Greany et al., 2014) all of which are essential if colleges are to meet the latest challenges within the sector. These challenges are many and varied; in their work on FE college governance Hill, James and Forrest (2016: 79) identify ten key challenges which they consider to be 'significant, substantial, simultaneous and synergistic' relating to the turbulent nature of the FE sector, the need to secure improvements in learner outcomes and the cost of resourcing provision. The declining financial health of the FE sector and the recent programme of Government led area reviews have resulted in an increase in the number of mergers across the sector. In addition the

employer-led reforms require managers to liaise and network across a wide range of stakeholders. Whilst these are clearly important contextual issues when considering middle management roles, it could be argued that those in the sector have become accustomed to this turbulence and what has been described as a 'tsunami of change' (Green 2012: 58) over the past two decades. A recent report (Greatbatch and Tate 2018) identified building leadership capacity as a key factor in an organisations ability to respond rapidly to these challenges, a fact endorsed by the introduction of a leadership qualification specifically aimed at raising leadership capability and capacity (ETF, 2017).

Management or Leadership?

The use of language is crucial when trying to describe the functions of management and leadership in Further Education. Whilst recent studies in the secondary sector focus on middle leaders, many within the FE sector still use the term middle manager. The word 'leader' has many positive connotations (Northouse, 2017) and is seen as something which creates aspirations rather than referring to the maintenance of processes that confirm the current situation (Bush et al., 2010). There is often an inculcated assumption in education that strong leadership is a positive within the sector (Yukl, 2002), a fact recognised by the transition in the language used to describe those in charge from educational management to educational leadership under previous governments. Perhaps because of this, there is some evidence to suggest that the word 'leadership' is used to describe functions that might traditionally be described as 'management' duties. Yukl (2002) noted how the terms are sometimes used interchangeably whilst Bush et al. (2010) and others (Hoyle and Wallace, 2005; Page, 2013) stress that the semantic difference is often an artificial one. In their ethnographic study of leadership in post compulsory education, Iszatt-White et al. (2011: 84) presented the 'mundane features' of leadership work; suggesting that leadership can be hard to distinguish from other kinds of managerial work. Whilst true, the counter argument, presented by Connolly et al. (2017), that leadership should only refer to those parts of the job where those holding these posts influence the actions of others, is the definition that is most common amongst writers and it is that influence that differentiates leadership tasks from management tasks (Fertig and James, 2016). Bush et al. (2010) confirm this by describing leadership as when a person exerts influence in order to achieve a certain goal. This links to Yukl's (2002) description of the importance of influence when leading and also with Northouse's (2017) view that a key role of the leader is to ensure that there was a common view from employees.

The interchangeable use of the two terms has not helped the process of distinguishing between them within Further Education (Gunter, 2004) and indeed in many cases people fulfilling the role are unsure how to label their it (*ibid*). For guidance many people look to the description given to them by the organisation and when asked to define their role, they quote their job title (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2018). This view is supported by Mullins (2016) who found that individuals generally seek to behave in a manner consistent with the way the role is defined, thus great care is needed to ensure that what is being said does not merely mirror the words of the organisation.

The Role of the Middle Manager

There appears to be little uniformity in how middle managers perceive and enact their role (Briggs, 2007). This may be linked to the environment in which they operate as well as their own interpretations. Briggs (2005) described how middle managers are responsible for translating policy into practice, putting in place the strategy devised by the colleges' senior leaders. It is clear from the literature (Earley, 1998; Glover et al., 1998) that many interpret their role as one of implementing strategy rather than creating it. This view is reinforced by Evans (2007) who demonstrated that much of the training received by middle managers focused on technical rather than leadership issues, or to put it another way, process rather than people.

Busher and Harris (1999) identified four key dimensions to the role and the balance between these elements helps to explain the nature of the job. The fluid and often ephemeral environment within which education exists means that the balance between the dimensions differs between managers but as a group, they help us understand the role. The first category is 'bridging and brokering' which refers to transactional leadership. This can be vital for middle managers as they enact the plans of the senior managers. It emphasises the human side of the job although it also stresses that the end goal is to implement something that has been decided at a senior level. The second element is 'a transformational dimension' which is the process of encouraging those working in the organisation to adapt creative approaches and continually look for improvements both in themselves and teaching in general. This part of the role is often neglected due to the complexity of the role and the issues faced by some managers looking to balance competing demands in organisations that are struggling to cope with the post-incorporation demands (Jameson, 2013). The third role, 'supervisory management' role might be described as a traditional, process role of a manager whilst the final role, 'representative leadership' requires the manager to represent their department both inside and outside the organisation. As can be seen, the majority of the roles identified

tend to focus on processes and defined objectives rather than a more holistic view of middle management. A view mirrored when looking at the role of the middle manager outside the education sector (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2018b).

Methodology

The findings for this paper emerged from the results of an online questionnaire that elicited 302 responses from people within the Further Education sector. The questionnaire was sent to all colleges within the FE sector, via email with a follow up email targeting sectors that were underrepresented in the initial survey. Breaking down the 302 rather more, we find that 208 respondents were female, (68% of the total sampled). This is slightly higher than the figures obtained by the Education and Training Foundation in their annual workforce survey (ETF, 2016) however, it does fall into acceptable confidence limits and so can be viewed as representative. A similar pattern was repeated when ethnic origin was investigated with 280 people answered 'white' when asked about their ethnic origin. National figures are difficult to find, with almost 1 in 5 employees failing to answer this question (ETF, 2016), however, when looking at the available information, this does seem to be broadly representative of the sector. All parts of the college sector were represented, with general FE colleges being the most popular place of work (181 responses), this was followed by Sixth Form Colleges (57 responses) and agricultural colleges (27 responses). This breakdown is very close to the proportions identified by the ETF. Participants were asked about their managerial experience to ensure that a broad cross section of experience was represented. The average time a middle manager had been in post was three years, whilst the range was from a few weeks to over fifteen years.

In addition to the questionnaire, 32 semi-structured interviews took place with managers in the sector. These were designed to understand the day to day jobs of the manager as well as how they perceive their role. A purposive sampling technique was used with the final demographic breakdown mirroring that of the most recent ETF survey (ETF, 2016), interviewees self-selected themselves via either direct contact or a section in the questionnaires that asked for volunteers. Ethical approval was gained via the authors' organisations.

Findings

There was wide variation in terms of size and scope of department, number of individuals managed and range of provision. There was also a plethora of different titles used, from Head of Area or Head of Department through to Assistant Director and Curriculum Manager. It is interesting to note that whilst 'Head of' or 'Manager' were commonly used, none of the interviewees had the term leader in their job title. This supports findings from the literature that unlike the compulsory sector where the use of leader rather than manager is common (Gunter, 2004), middle leadership is not a phrase that is often used in FE (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2018).

The span of control varied significantly from departments that numbered only a few members of staff, to those that encompassed a multi-disciplinary department but what was common was that the accountability lay with the middle manager and they were expected to represent and explain performance within their area.

In common with previous studies (Lumby, 2001; Briggs, 2003; Lambert, 2014) the managers appeared reluctant to identify themselves as leaders, preferring instead to see the role as one where management took precedence. This meant their focus was on the operational rather than strategic aspects.

> *I'm responsible for making sure it works, that's how I see it.*
>
> (Phil)
>
> *I think it's just making sure that all the cogs in the area work together successfully.*
> (Susanne)

Their roles were broad and encompassed a wide range of tasks and responsibilities. Murphy and Curtis (2013), researching programme leaders in the HE sector, found that the definition of what the role included was rather vague leading to the blurring of boundaries in terms of responsibility and the same was true in the case of the middle managers in this study. In many cases this caused a lack of role clarity leading the managers to focus on process and disparate individual tasks.

The actual work of leadership is difficult to define whereas management can more easily be broken down into a set of activities and this can cause individuals to 'default to management' in describing their roles and identity (Carroll and Levy, 2008: 76). The majority of managers were clear when describing their role.

There are definitely elements of both but, primarily, it's a manager.

(Ruth)

I suppose I am doing both with a management bias to it.

(Ben)

I think I'm pretty clear as a manager. The majority of time I spend on management.

(Phil)

These views were supported by the language used in formally describing the role when appointing new people. This supports the earlier statement that people look to the description given to them by the organisation in defining their role (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2018).

When questioned further, participants' answers showed that the line between leadership and management was blurred with no distinct boundary and they were seen as linked or blended together. There was evidence that the middle managers were drawing on aspects of both leadership and management on a daily basis to ensure their department was successful. However, many participants found it hard to draw out specific examples of activities which they categorised as leadership, as this was so closely intertwined with their management role. There was also evidence to suggest that in some instances their role was deliberately being categorised as a managerial one, despite elements of leadership being present. The words of Dennis, who was a head of department in a large Further Education college showed this to good effect. When asked to describe his job, he first mentioned the paperwork, the need to meet targets, the meetings with senior management and other traditionally managerial process driven tasks, yet when pressed he talked about new initiatives he had introduced, the ways in which he had empowered his staff and his vision for the department. Despite this however, frustrations remained:

The biggest frustration is the lack of autonomy. If I could remove one thing it would be that lack of ability to have freedom in the development without having to go 'cap in hand' saying 'can I do this?

(Dennis)

This meant that he downplayed his importance and viewed himself as an implementer rather than an influencer.

The focus on the process of management was supported by the managers surveyed who talked about the importance of making sure that things ran smoothly, although others voiced similar frustrations to Dennis and referred to cases whereby they were explicitly told that their job was to complete management rather than leadership tasks:

> *We were told that you are not going to meet up as a team without senior management there…. Which we felt gave quite a strong message to us….that we weren't necessarily trusted to be professional and come up with our own agenda.*
>
> (Linda)

The shift towards managerialist positivism was clear in many of the answers. Many managers described their job as a series of objectives that needed to be achieved and this sometimes created an approach which conjured up images of running on a treadmill, achieving the quantitative based goals described by Walby (2003) but never actually getting anywhere:

> *We live and die by rules that are a nonsense and what you have to do is to meet these needs…. Our procedures at the college are so well set that in many ways I just have to follow them ….in many ways I am just a cog in the machine*
>
> (Hubert)

For some there was a frustration that the day-to-day activities of management prevented them from carrying out a leadership role, as shown in the following quotes:

> *I would love it to be both. At the moment I feel like it is just management due to the sheer volume of work.*
>
> (Laura)

> *I think for leadership there is a lot more forward thinking and I think the sad thing is we don't have time to do that. Time is occupied in our daily management role.*
>
> (Ruth)

Despite this reluctance to describe their roles in terms that relate to leadership, managers demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting and developing the individuals in their teams and showed leadership when doing so. Leading the team was seen as an essential part of ensuring its success and as one participant observed 'you have to take it seriously because what you say and do has an impact'. In most of the colleges there were no other direct leaders for the staff to 'follow' other than their head of department. This supports the view of Briggs (2001) that for most middle managers, leadership is localised within a department. Comments made by the interviewees focused on the importance of maintaining a high profile and being accessible:

> *Every day I make sure that I put my coat on and go out and meet everyone, I don't have an agenda or anything it is just about being visible and it gives you credibility. You can also solve a lot of small problems before they become big problems. Oh and it means I can keep an eye on my team…. And I suppose they can keep an eye on me!*
>
> (Annalise)

> *If I've not gone round the campus and wandered into a classroom, or wandered into the workshops, at least two or three times a week, I feel like I've not been out*

there, so being out there and being seen helps, and talking to the teams, finding out what the issues are.

(Mike)

This practice enabled the managers to engage with staff in a more informal manner as they walked around the organisation. Although unstructured, this method of building relationships through face to face contact was highly valued by managers and emerged in their practice as an intuitive response to meeting the needs of the team. Diamond and Spillane (2016) focus on leadership activity to identify the work of leadership and analyse leadership practices within an organisation. This approach focuses on interactions that take place between people in the organisation. This activity could be viewed as a leadership as it comprises opportunities to motivate staff and to communicate the college's vision and values, practices which Buckner (2008) argues makes leadership more effective.

There is evidence that for some managers the leadership aspects of the role do start to come to the fore, as demonstrated in the words of Susanne, an experienced manager who had worked in FE for many years:

…probably in the past two years it might have gone more into a leadership role than it has done previously and, I think, part of that is my own personal development and growing with experience and, I think, it's also having confidence to step back and let your team do.

(Susanne)

However, throughout the study it was evident that the leadership aspects of their roles were downplayed or even ignored by managers despite their importance in enabling the organisation to respond and implement changes in policy and direction. Their comments demonstrated that they were providing direction for their departments through development and delivery of the curriculum and that they were clearly focused on their vision for their area.

They supported and developed their teams, motivating them to produce good results and they spoke about accountability and responsibility for the work and performance of their area; all activities that link with Northouse's (2017) view of what constitutes leadership. This link with established literature suggests there is agreement with Lumby (2001: 12) who notes 'leadership may be embodied in what people do, not what they say'.

Conclusion

The wide variations in how the middle manager's role is viewed and enacted within FE adds a level of complexity when drawing out leadership and management aspects. A change in

terminology may encourage individuals to think differently about their role if, as we believe, role descriptors are part of creating identity then it may be time to embrace the term middle leader within FE. The findings suggest that there is a dichotomy between how managers perceive their role (which is generally aligned with the title given to them by the organisation) and what they actually do, which contains clear elements of how leadership is defined by literature.

Our findings support Evans (2008) view that leadership behaviours of those in the middle are more focused on day to day issues and people management. A key part of the role involves drawing together the strategic and operational aspects and implementing organisational change (Collinson, 2007). To achieve this they need to encourage and support their team to turn policy into practice, this fits with the view of leadership expressed by Bush et al. (2010) that it is the act of motivating people towards achieving a common goal. Participants in this research did this and although not structured, this approach to their role was seen as essential.

In the study, managers appear to consider the role definition of leadership one that they have difficulty in identifying with. This is due to either the pressures of the managerial aspects of the role or the culture of the organisation. This leads to a focus on a process driven approach. Viewing leadership as an activity (Diamond and Spillane, 2016) provides a way to analyse the work of the middle managers in this study. It also helps to deepen understanding of their contribution to leadership within the wider organisation as it provides a more holistic view of the work undertaken within this complex leader-manager role. Individuals engaged in this activity can be helped to understand and improve their practice (Whittington, 2004) assisting them in terms of their professional development. What this study has suggested is that this practice driven model of leadership could have positive benefits for managers and organisations. As area reviews create new larger organisations it will be impossible for one single leader to do all the work of leadership. This presents opportunities for middle managers to develop their role participating in the strategic processes and leadership of the organisation. As the sector needs to build leadership capacity it could do this by utilising the experience and expertise of those in the middle of the organisation to help meet the current and future challenges.

It is clear that many managers are leaders within their areas. Although managers are likely to focus on the process elements of their role, in particular the need to complete individual tasks, as they grow into their role, in order to survive and then thrive, the transference to a practice

based model represents the chance to become a more successful leader within the organisation. We suggest that more attention needs to be given to middle management roles and how these are defined to enable this. Further work is required to support the development of leadership capabilities and capacity within the sector.

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