

THE AGILE UNIVERSITY

CASE STUDY

UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST OF ENGLAND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Leading for Future Success



University of the
West of England



elementa
leadership

The Context & Need

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The University of the West of England, along with the rest of UK Higher Education was undergoing a period of substantial change. Restructuring had reduced the number of Faculties from nine to five and during this process thirty new managers were appointed to manage academic departments. The University recognised that it needed to build its ability and agility in effecting organisational change and improvement in response to a dynamic and fast changing environment.

The Vice-Chancellor's review of the University's positioning and practices involved some significant changes. This included a far greater emphasis on building 'One University'. Further restructuring and close scrutiny of all academic programmes from a strategic and financial perspective was taking place and the University recognised that in this context there was a need to invest in the development of its managers and leaders. This was particularly important given, that for some, this would be the first time that they had been required to lead and manage people through 'difficult times'.

It was agreed early on in the project, that the programme would take a 'post-heroic' view of leadership, focusing on voice, engagement and the development of a collective leadership capability in which power (and control) was widely distributed in order to make better sense of the ambiguity and complexity surrounding the University as a whole and its constituent departments. The programme did not, therefore, assume 'one right way' of leading or enabling change, but offered theories, models, real world experiences and case studies to generate dialogue, fresh thinking and planning for improvement.

Our Approach

Our approach to Leadership and Management Development

The ability to craft an organisation around a core purpose that gives meaning to each employee, thereby accessing the vast reservoirs of available discretionary effort is indeed a leadership challenge. To do this in a way that builds trust between leader and follower requires the ethical and responsible use of power that respects both individual and community. In an increasingly diverse and pluralistic world, leaders need to deliver exceptional performance through interdependence and collaboration, often through 'cross-boundary' networks, alliances and teams. Exceptional leaders do all of this and in so doing lay the foundations for exceptional performance. A performance based upon passion for purpose, meaning enabled discretionary effort, high levels of trust built on authentic engagement and a desire to achieve and succeed together as interdependent communities. They ask themselves 'why should anyone be led by me?' and know how to answer the question.

Our approach is informed by the following:

- Achieve wide stakeholder engagement and support in the programme design process
- Ensure appropriate underpinning and academically credible theories and models
- Avoid over simplistic 'one right way' advocacy for a highly intelligent, challenging and articulate audience
- Relate to, and question directly, the actual leadership challenges faced by the HE sector and for each individual
- Facilitate problem solving and learning around real issues and use peer coaching, challenge and support as a key enabling mechanism
- Help people to see the challenges and priorities of the wider institution to make better sense of their own issues and dilemmas
- Help people to see how they can build relationships and connections across various University boundaries
- Help participants to build a self-organising leadership community that sustains itself beyond the formal programme
- Encourage dialogue, use provocation and be prepared to challenge
- Appreciate and value the unique context in which academic leadership exists
- Help participants to understand leadership in non-HE contexts and to learn from this
- Help participants to understand how universities in different global HE systems go about becoming or staying 'world class'

The Solution

Elementa Leadership co-created a process with UWE for developing managers and leaders. It consisted of three stages :



Stage One

Future Focus Conference

A one day Future Focus Management Conference for the top 300 managers from all parts of the University was developed as a vital part of the change process and was designed to engage with the 'hearts and minds' of the participating managers. The Conference was based on principles of dialogue and interaction. It was designed to enable managers, both emotionally and practically, to lead and manage in a period of uncertainty.

The Future Focus Conference provided an opportunity for managers to come together and better understand the University's strengths and how to build on these and to help the University identify current issues, future challenges and develop creative solutions. Part of the Conference was devoted to a 'big picture' view of the economic and political context. In mixed groups managers were able, through dialogue, to break through cultural, departmental and professional barriers to better see how the University might work in response to a challenging environment.

Representatives from stakeholder organisations gave input and answered questions. Issues of significance such as the student experience were addressed by the Student Union President and a sectoral perspective was provided by Hefce.

The Conference participants worked on 'appreciating' UWE, that is to say that they acknowledged the strengths of the University and what aspects of the University should be carried into the future, as well as identifying processes that could be executed more effectively and efficiently whilst delivering an enhanced student experience. The Future Focus Conference was designed to facilitate maximum involvement and share collective wisdom and creativity. The themes and issues captured in the Future Focus Conference informed the design of the Future Focus Workshops that were to follow.

The Solution

The Future Focus Workshops for both stages two and three aimed to:

- Provide an opportunity for senior and middle managers to work together to consider the issues challenging the University and to develop a leadership community and networks focused on shared goals
- To enable senior and middle managers to have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities and priorities for strategic leadership and management
- To explore and develop the attitudes, skills, tools and techniques to be effective in building a high performing organisation and high performing teams that could continuously adapt to a fast changing context.

Stage Two

Future Focus Workshop for Senior Managers

This one and a half day event built on the input and outcomes of the Future Focus Conference and placed the actual and/or anticipated change challenges and opportunities of participating managers at the heart of the learning process.

The workshop allowed for dialogue, exchange, provocation and collective sense making. The University was considered as a whole system and explored the best strategies for bringing about 'systemic change'. It was designed to enable managers both emotionally and practically to lead and manage in a period of uncertainty.

Stage Three

Future Focus Workshop for Heads of Department

A two day programme was delivered to mixed groups of senior and middle managers who needed to build more agile, high performing teams and units.

Working together over two days these managers considered the challenges facing the University and how these impacted on their own teams. They looked at their own leadership and management responsibilities and priorities and began to develop the attitudes and skills, tools and techniques needed to be effective in building high performing teams. The workshop offered theories and best practice tools for communicating about change and managing performance which were two themes identified at the Future Focus Conference.

Following each Future Focus event a detailed report summarising the key outputs, learning and themes was collated and produced to inform the future leadership and management development strategy and to act as an additional guide to the Assistant Vice-Chancellor, Business Change and Innovation.

The Result

Future Focus Conference

The Conference outputs acted as input data for the design of the subsequent Future Focus workshops. It helped the whole leadership population of UWE recognise just how powerful and influential it could be, promoting a sense of agency. It began the process of building a powerful leadership community and network across UWE and it gave voice to a range of different perspectives without fear or favour. Importantly, it allowed people to voice their anxieties and concerns with their peers, through respectful dialogue and have these views and any improvement suggestions fed directly to the Senior Management Team for their consideration. It generated ideas and enthusiasm for responding to the range of challenges and opportunities that were identified and in so doing built a sense of pride in what UWE had already achieved and what it might achieve in the future.

Senior Management Team Future Focus Workshop

This workshop enabled the senior team to stand back and reflect upon what it was trying to achieve in terms of vision and strategic plan and assess the progress being made. It helped it define more clearly the opportunities, challenges and dilemmas it faced aided by frank and open conversation. It reinforced to the senior team the need for it to act in concert in order that it could effect the joining up of the University in response to the opportunities, challenges and dilemmas identified. The workshop enabled the senior team to identify a small number of areas for focus and improvement. These included the creation of more boundaryless ways of thinking and working which would require an end to some of the silo working that had been identified. It also included the need for senior leaders to genuinely empower staff within clear boundaries and ensuring roles and accountabilities were absolutely clear. Additionally, the senior team recognised the need for it to role model effective performance management by dealing appropriately and quickly with poor performance and more readily identifying and recognising high performance at both individual and team levels. Finally it recognised that it needed to work much harder at staying connected to the wider organisation by ensuring that a two way communication process and culture, based upon dialogue, was promoted and sustained. In short that when 'the going got tough' the senior leaders would get more visible and accessible rather than less so.

Heads of Department Future Focus Workshops

The feedback documented through the post workshop evaluation process was very positive. Participants valued the ability to understand different theoretical models and apply them directly to their own specific leadership challenges and opportunities. The feedback also highlighted the growing sense of understanding the mixed groups were achieving about the operation of the university as a whole.

The Result

Heads of Department Future Focus Workshops continued

This included many favourable comments about the opportunity for academic and professional support staff to learn from each other about their respective contributions, aspirations and challenges. The positive feedback about the dialogue session with the Vice-Chancellor, who attended each workshop, evidently built trust and helped participants to better appreciate the 'bigger picture' and the reasons behind UWE's response to this. It was not surprising to find some anxiety and frustration raised about continuing uncertainty and ambiguity as the workshops took place whilst many roles, processes and structures had yet to be finalised. Each participant went away with a clarity over a small number of improvements they would seek to implement within the context of their own team/s or indeed their own leadership practice. The benefit observed can be best understood through the quotes from participants:

- "Avoid simple solutions to complex problems and try to give more time to leadership rather than task"
- "How to have difficult conversations early. The damage to UWE of tolerating poor performance"
- "Networking. Hearing issues across different parts of the university"
- "Not allowing myself to be overly concerned with what I can't influence"
- "Make time to clarify people's roles so they can be more effective"
- "The importance of alignment and engagement in change management"
- "The importance of discretionary effort and what can reduce it"
- "That feedback is everywhere if you just stop and listen"
- "Get staff involved and informed early – be honest, build trust"
- "Greater understanding of why people are challenged by change"

In the view of Dr Richard O'Doherty, Assistant Vice-Chancellor, Business Change and Innovation:



"The University has emerged from an 18 month period of intense change with massive uncertainty for all individuals during that time. For me the period has been marked by the high degree of discretionary effort from staff at all levels who have engaged with the very challenging agenda on top of 'business as usual'. This has not happened by chance but by the efforts and skills of the leadership and management teams across the institution. I am now convinced that when we listened to Elementa Leadership at the outset of the Change Programme, that we heeded their advice. The Leadership Events for senior and middle managers have proved invaluable in galvanising a sense of wide ownership of the change agenda and have engendered a skills base for managers allowing them to help their staff through difficult times."

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