

Thriving on the edge of chaos...

FE needs pioneers, not hero leaders

What does it take to be a leader in further education? How has this changed in the last 10 years? Or the last 5? Or even the last 3? If you knew back then what you know now about the leadership challenges, how would you have prepared differently to take on your current role?

Taking on the baton of FE leadership and thriving in this shifting landscape is not for the faint hearted; requirements are increasingly complex and demanding, at a time when the world is far less certain. Our role in finding, selecting and developing senior leaders across the education sector enables us to see, first hand, the increasing pressure for FE colleges and groups to continue to deliver improved high quality education outcomes whilst facing funding pressures, the fragmentation of service delivery models and the need to partner and collaborate with neighbouring education and private sector partners. Combined with the rapid rise of technology and the expectations to deliver more for less, increased public scrutiny and regulation and international demographic pressures impacting the supply and demand of students, it is no surprise that 21st century leadership requires such resilient visionaries.

In response, FE Principals and Group CEOs are rightly asking, 'Is our strategy adjusting to the forces of change? How future ready is our current leadership cohort?' and 'Which of our people has the most potential to move into senior leadership roles?' With increasing accountability at the top of FE organisations, is it any wonder that the pipeline of individuals wanting to - and ready to - step up for senior leadership roles is, at times, quite sparse?



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Is it time hero leadership fell from grace?

It's not all bad news though. The national skills agenda has given the sector more belief and confidence. Despite all the challenges, College Groups are evolving, and a new breed of leader is beginning to emerge. One who fundamentally moves away from the stereotypical 'heroic leader' whose role is to lead their teams into battle and victory is achieved through their actions and through their ability to build followership to win the hearts and minds of others. What's the problem with this, some might ask? Surely a leader should be the personal heartbeat of transformation: one who people look to shape the future, define and communicate the strategy and vision; to inspire and motivate followers; assign roles; evaluate and reward performance?

These things are important, of course, and our national study into the characteristics that differentiate outstanding leaders in public life has determined 12 characteristics that separate good leaders from great ones. Great ones who act as more than individualistic hero leaders and instead lead as pioneers. The research highlights the downside of hero leaders - who risk creating dependency - rather than encouraging ownership - which is bad news if an organisation's objective is to develop an extended team of leaders or a culture of leadership. At a time of change where we want employees to frequently challenge the status quo and think differently, followers of the disconnected hero will find this unnecessarily difficult thus stifling innovation. Worse still, as challenges and problems arise (which they will always do) hero leaders will find themselves stuck firefighting and unable to look up, step out and focus on the strategic side of the job.

So what defines this new Pioneer style of leader? It's a type of leader who is agile in approach, commercial in thought, yet at heart committed to educational outcomes and to supporting the skills agenda in their region. They combine an infectious passion for students – with the underlying commitment to taking increasingly levels of responsibility and delivering results. They aren't afraid to do what's never been done before. They encourage growth for the College, the people around them and the broader community. They look above the organisational parapet, actively seeking partnerships, staying current by spotting and adapting best practices elsewhere and grasping opportunities to stretch beyond the status quo. These are pioneering leadership qualities - not heroic ones - focused on progressing through new and uncharted territory. This form of leadership enables the exploration, development, learning and progress through the complexity and paradox of an uncertain future. Fundamentally, it's how Colleges stay relevant and grow.

So, leaders across the sector must adapt quickly to new working environments in varying stages of maturity, requiring a more sophisticated repertoire of leadership behaviours and versatility of leadership style than ever before. The challenge right now is how to absorb more of these types of leaders into the sector. This applies at varying levels across college structures - from the board of governors right the way through to heads of department. In our view, developing leaders of this ilk is not a nice to have – it is essential. Developing leadership capability, and by extension, a pioneering leadership culture to support such individuals are, and will continue to be, game changing steps for organisations.

Can you create a pioneering culture ?

GatenbySanderson's Leadership and Talent Consultancy Practice has worked extensively with a range of Further Education College Groups to enhance individual and team performance and build high performing, motivated and resilient top teams.

Our tailored solutions include:

Assessment and Talent Insight

A critical question for boards and executive teams is whether the right skills are in place to deliver the future strategy. We have partnered with several FE College and national sector bodies to assess external candidates' and internal employees' capability and future potential. We offer a range of assessment solutions, providing expert advice on which psychometric tools to utilise. In addition, strategic succession planning remains a critical gap across the sector and a robust assessment is key to ensuring that talent management and succession plans are fit for the future. We design and deliver a range of light touch, yet in-depth senior level assessment processes for section, internal promotion and organisational re-design purposes.

Leadership and Organisational Development

Maximising leadership impact, particularly against the challenging context of the Education landscape, is driven by individual and collective behavioural change. We specialise in supporting individual leaders, senior team and boards to pioneer change. Our approach addresses the outcomes to be achieved and the steps needed to get there. In the last twelve months we have worked with two large college groups to develop large scale, tailored leadership programmes focused on supporting leadership transitions into a new more commercial world where they are required to lead across an increasingly complex organisational structure.



Executive Coaching

We believe in an evidence based approach, grounded within the organisational context and underpinned by our extensively researched 'Altitude' model. This model measures what good leadership looks like within public services and enables individuals to sustainably change their behaviours. We have long standing coaching relationships with a range of FE executive leaders and a national network of experienced, well qualified coaches.

Board and Governance Review

We have significant experience of working with boards and councils, grounded within deep sector knowledge to ensure the optimum blend of skills, diversity and culture is present. In close partnership with both Chairs and CEOs, our work across the FE sector supports Boards in understanding governor's roles, the behaviours that are required for successful governance and the relationships between governors and executive teams. In our experience, effective board leadership and governance enables colleges to operate to their fullest capacity. We would be delighted to share more about this and about our recent work with Leeds City College Group and Warwickshire College Group, two of the largest college groups in the country.



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Andrew White

Andrew is a Senior Assessment and Development Consultant at GatenbySanderson. He specialises in building organisational capability through the design and delivery of assessment, selection and development interventions for senior executives and high potential leaders.

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