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Leading the way: the first five years of the Leading Learning Programme

Sue Isherwood and Melita Armitage explain the origins and the future of sport, leisure and culture's own leadership programme, and why it continues to transform careers, challenge perceptions and shape the sector.

Back in 2008 Martyn Allison and Sue Isherwood started the Leading Learning Programme specifically for aspiring leaders working in the cultural and sport sector. Fast forward five years and more than 100 people have taken part, with the majority either broadening their roles with their original employers or taking on new posts at an enhanced level, all at a time of rapid change in the public sector.

"Since undertaking the Leadership Programme I have had two promotions, the first in April 2011... and the most recent in February 2013 when I became director of commissioning, now part of the senior management team reporting direct to the chief executive. I am also still the strategic lead for culture and leisure across the county. The programme has already helped shape my career progression to date."

The model we've developed gives participants a year of leadership development comprising five elements: 360° exercise and learning style assessment, residential learning (seven days), mentoring (up to nine meetings), action learning (up to six sets) and resources to support learning. Compared with ten similarly structured leadership programmes, we offer either a greater number of contact days or a broader range of learning elements. Critically, we offer a highly competitive rate and flexible payment options.

What is exciting about the Leading Learning Programme is that within this structure people really do have a personalised learning experience. We take time to get to know our participants at the beginning of the process and help them better understand their leadership behaviours. We take care in matching participants with their mentors. Our programme brings in experts who genuinely believe that we have an opportunity to make doing business for local authorities more effective and more enjoyable.

"Having a chief executive as a mentor helped me to appreciate the need to take a helicopter view of situations... Thinking at this high level has enabled us to make a significant contribution to the economic agenda which surprised businesses and some council officials who now see that the service has something powerful to offer in relation to their objectives."

Our programme is unique because it has a focus on culture and sports. We know that our leaders are being asked to do more with less and our programme offers the tools that place strategy and politics at the centre of how to do business.

Feedback tells us that we have helped participants to reconnect their departments with the rest of their organisations and to manage risk with greater confidence. We know too that for the majority the programme has met 80% or more of their individual learning needs and over 90%

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"We are recruiting now for 2015 so here is an appeal to Leisure Review readers: join us, recommend and facilitate your colleagues, spread the word and help us realise our vision."

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agree that the programme has enabled them to feel better equipped to work with key politicians.

“It has allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of what is meant by leadership and stimulated a more imaginative and mature approach to tackling strategic and operational problems in the workplace.”

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Our alumni are also positive about the impact of the programme, the majority agreeing in our most recent survey that it will be instrumental in helping them to realise their target roles and that it has helped them to be more resilient, to “survive and thrive” in tough times.

Each element of our programme achieves consistently high ratings in relation to the quality of the learning experience and management. For example, the most recent cohort rated their enjoyment of residencies at 3.8, the usefulness of the content at 3.4 and the applicability of what they had learnt at 3.7, using a scale where 4.0 was the maximum.

This is why we run the programme. If we stop investing in the leaders in our sector we risk too much, not least the opportunity to see people flourish and continue to make a difference for our communities. The last thing we want is for cultural and sports professionals to leave the public sector because posts become less attractive owing to negative perceptions: a combative work environment, rife with inefficiency and constant firefighting. And that’s where we think Leading Learning makes a difference. Again and again the feedback participants are telling us that they have been re-energised as a result of the programme and that they know how their blend of skills and leadership can be used to best effect.

“The course has boosted my confidence, restored faith in my own abilities, given me new skills and tactics for approaching challenges and key relationships at work, and broadened my understanding of local government. As a result my team is stronger, my senior team are more responsive to me... and I also feel now that I can handle difficult staff and political issues with equal confidence.”

The commitment to the cultural and sports sectors is at the heart of the Leading Learning Programme but the vision is greater: to change and improve the public sector as a whole through developing culture and sports professionals in the field.

What is perhaps unsurprising, but important to note, is that the Leading Learning Programme attracts people who are positive in the face of increasing challenges within their professional environments. We do not have rooms full of despondent people, feeling bitter and pessimistic. Instead our participants are alert to the realities of the context but maintain an upbeat temperament and a belief that culture and sport can contribute positively in society.

“I drew important lessons from the sessions about being constantly proactive or ‘ahead of the wave’ and that it’s important to be in a state of readiness to seize opportunities as much as it is wishing to take them.”

This is the spirit that pervades our programme. We are recruiting now for 2015 so here is an appeal to Leisure Review readers: join us, recommend and facilitate your colleagues, spread the word and help us realise our vision.

Sue Isherwood is the director of the Leading Learning Programme and this article is based on the findings of the five-year summative evaluation of the Leading Learning Programme researched and written by Melita Armitage. Download a copy of the full report from the Leading Learning website at www.ncfleadinglearning.co.uk

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