

Cascading Leadership: Evaluation report Summary

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Summary

The Cascading Leadership pilot started with two central premises:

- 1) that thoughtful and reflective leadership increases the effectiveness of organisations; and
- 2) that the voluntary sector itself has the skills and assets needed to develop strong leaders.

30 voluntary sector CEOs took part in the pilot; 15 as clients and 15 as consultants. Without exception, they view Cascading Leadership as a success in terms of the benefits they have gained both individually and organisationally. The pilot demonstrated that supporting voluntary sector leaders to offer consultancy to other leaders within the sector enables them to develop professional skills, alongside deeper strategic leadership.

Thoughtful and reflective leadership

Clients greatly appreciated the opportunity Cascading Leadership afforded them to have time away from the immediate pressures and constraints of running an organisation. This allowed them to reflect upon key strategic questions and how to address them. Vitally, this approach allowed clients to have space away from practical concerns, whilst focussing upon organisational priorities.

- “What has been most useful is having some focussed time and space for reflection and development and sharing the wisdom of my consultant.” Client second survey
- “I brought problems, she helped me come up with my own solutions.” Client interview
- “The thing that stood out was having peer support outside my usual terms of reference. There was no hidden agenda, no baggage, and it didn’t feel competitive at all; there was mutual respect.” Client interview
- “The challenge of small organisations is that you have to do everything – Cascading Leadership gives you time to reflect; you are allowed to recognise the impact of change.” 1 November workshop
- “A thinking space is not valued in society.” 1 November workshop
- “The reflection bit is the important part of the process.” 1 November workshop

Research into leadership in the public and voluntary sectors¹ demonstrates that developing thoughtful, reflective leaders reaps substantial organisational benefits, including more effective delivery to service users. The CEOs' collective sense that giving themselves time and space to think will support them to develop stronger leadership skills, is borne out by the literature.

The evaluation process has also highlighted an apparent dichotomy in the current provision of leadership support within the voluntary sector. This is identified in The King's Fund's underpinning assumptions as: *“third sector leaders can have important gaps in their knowhow and this is best ‘filled’ by listening to experts and following their guidance vs. people know their leadership challenges best and need support to think through what they do.”*

This poses a challenge about how best to provide the practical and strategic support necessary for developing effective leadership. During the pilot this was framed by clients and consultants as a dilemma about the extent to which working on practical issues can be understood as an element of leadership development. Cascading Leadership offers a way to address this, as clients are enabled to address presenting problems as well as their underlying causes.

Assets and the potential of the voluntary sector

Cascading Leadership draws upon existing voluntary sector knowledge and skills, and provides an opportunity to highlight the experience and assets that exist within the sector, rather than employing a deficit model that assumes the sector is in need of external support. This is particularly important at a time of low public confidence and trust in charities.

The approach of working CEO>CEO meant clients felt reassured that consultants intimately understood the challenges they face, and also felt that they could learn from someone in a very similar role:

- “Support from someone in the sector means there is a common understanding.”
Client interview
- “There’s a greater appreciation of what you’re going through. They’ve got a knowledge of that particular landscape.” Client interview
- “It’s third sector helping third sector, they understand the world you’re working in.”
Client interview
- “It’s CEO>CEO – this is a unique offer and so it’s critically important it was a CEO from the voluntary sector but not a competitor.” 1 November workshop
- “It’s about building the capacity of the sector to lead from within.’ 1 November workshop

¹ See for example: West Michael et al *Leadership and Leadership Development in Health Care: The evidence base* (The King's Fund: 2015) Northern Leadership Academy *How Does Leadership Make a Difference to Organisational Culture and Effectiveness: An overview for the public sector* (NLA: 2007), Hartley and Benington *Recent Trends in Leadership: Thinking and action in the public and voluntary service sectors* (The King's Fund: 2011)

- “The important thing is that this model is unique and interesting: the benefit of charities working with charities, understanding the challenges they all face. You are getting support from inside your own sector and the opportunity to build networks, develop skills.” Partner interview

Improved skills

Clients received practical support and expert advice on issues including impact measurement; funding; governance; and policy development. They developed their professional skills during the pilot by working with the consultants on specific areas they had identified for support. This directly influenced, for example, the numbers of funding applications submitted; the evaluation tools used; and the development of effective policies on issues such as volunteer management:

- “We’ve implemented some of the practical tools, like measuring impact.” Client interview
- “I felt it had more of a problem-solving focus than other things I’ve engaged with; I felt I could go with problems and they would get sorted.” Client interview
- “My interaction was more on the practical, governance, side.” Client interview
- “It gives confidence, self-belief, calmness.” 1 November workshop
- “It has increased my communications skills.” 1 November workshop

Clients also stated that they had improved their line-management skills and built stronger relationships with staff. Some felt that this was already having a direct impact upon organisational effectiveness, through improved staff confidence and competence. They also forged more effective and positive relationships with their Boards and Chairs, and as a result saw an increased ability of the Board to address key strategic questions:

- “It has led to the empowerment of staff to make the organisation more resilient and they are correspondingly more effective.” 1 November workshop
- “I have shared the learning with my Trustees who have just been ticking over for years. There is now a more critical eye on their role, whether we have the right people, who we might approach; this has been a revelation.” Client interview

Consultants also developed their professional skills as a result of the supervision, training and practical experience they gained. In particular, they noticed that their coaching skills were stronger. These skills were taken back into their organisations, and consultants noted staff and volunteer management practices are now more effective, as a result of knowing: how and when to ask the right questions; how to offer support without immediately giving advice; and how to challenge constructively.

- “Through practising my skills I more naturally implement these with my team and have encouraged colleagues to reflect more, to observe emotional responses, explore gut feelings.” Consultant second survey
- “The input from The King’s Fund on different coaching models helped me to frame conversations and development sessions with staff in new ways. Hopefully the Senior Management Team has gained from my improved focus on coaching techniques.” Consultant second survey
- “I’m a natural reassurer; I want to jump in and rescue - there’s a temptation to try and manage the client’s organisation. But I realised I wasn’t the expert, the real expert was already running it.” Consultant interview

More strategic leadership

Clients were encouraged to understand how these practical challenges interacted with strategic questions, and to look afresh at organisational strategy and priorities. The Cascading Leadership pilot allowed for constructive challenge and questioning from other CEOs; this helped clients to develop responses to internal and external challenges and changing contexts. In some cases, this also meant tackling substantial issues clients had not previously addressed:

- “This helped me think through the structure of the organization; I’ve now formed a management team.” Client interview
- “Trustees are now more involved in staff reporting and annual reviews; staff are more signed up to, and understand the importance of, following protocols.” Client second survey
- “It created a learning culture in my organisation.” 1 November workshop

Clients also felt that their partnerships and ability to work collaboratively had been improved as a result of the confidence and skills they gained:

- “This pilot has re-enforced the strengths of working with other organisations in the sector.” Client second survey
- “I have given feedback on funding bids and tenders to partner organisations, based on the learning that I have achieved through the pilot.” Client second survey

Consultants also reported that participating in the pilot had benefits beyond the development of their professional skills. They noticed they were thinking and behaving more strategically as a result, in particular asking more challenging questions both internally and in external meetings.

- “Working together sparked my own questions; you can’t help but reflect back on the questions to ask your own organisation.” Consultant interview
- “The techniques in the training in terms of asking open and difficult questions have been used both within the team and SMT.” Consultant second survey
- “I am applying this within my own organisation; taking time out to focus on that part of my practice which I then check my daily work against; it has become intrinsic.” Consultant interview

What makes Cascading Leadership distinctive?

Cascading Leadership has seven elements that combined set it apart from other offers to the voluntary sector. These are:

1. **Support to consultants:** the training, supervision and honoraria are all critical elements in consultants developing the skills necessary to support clients. The supervision in particular was highly praised for the rigorous and professional support offered, which enabled consultants to develop their practice.
2. **Support for clients:** whilst this could be developed further, the training day enabled clients to take up the consultancy offer in a more trusting way; the more trust there is, the more they are likely to open up.
3. **Consultancy from within the voluntary sector:** clients felt they gained hugely from working with a consultant who understood their world and work. Critically, the consultant was also a CEO, someone who understands first-hand the pressures they face. This also provides an opportunity to highlight the skills and experience that exist within the sector.
4. **A time-limited intervention:** knowing the support was not open-ended allowed clients and consultants to focus and be specific about what could be achieved.
5. **Practice development and leadership development:** this could be further clarified, but the fact there is potential for the two to go alongside one another means that clients receive both the strategic and practical support they need.
6. **Support related directly to organisational need:** Cascading Leadership relates directly to the client’s organisation. Whilst they greatly appreciate the time away from the day-to-day realities of work, the issues they bring are organisational.
7. **Focus on small-medium organisations:** Cascading Leadership has so far explicitly focused upon small-medium organisations, most with a turnover of around £500,000. Many are facing strategic decisions about whether and how to expand, or whether to remain the same size. Their leaders typically do not have the time or budget to access other training offers, and found the tightly focused, small scale, nature of Cascading Leadership to be extremely helpful. However, there is nothing in the evidence to suggest that this approach would not also benefit larger organisations.

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