



M O N O G R A P H

VOICES OF THE SHAMED: THE PERSONAL TOLL OF SHAME AND SHAMING IN FURTHER EDUCATION

FROM THE CHARTERED INSTITUTION
FOR FURTHER EDUCATION

ABOUT FETL

The Further Education Trust for Leadership’s vision is of a further education sector that is valued and respected for:

- Innovating constantly to meet the needs of learners, communities and employers;
- Preparing for the long term as well as delivering in the short term; and
- Sharing fresh ideas generously and informing practice with knowledge.

M O N O G R A P H

FETL monographs are short, forward-looking treatments of subjects key to the leadership of thinking in further education and skills. Written at the invitation of the Trust, they aim to influence leadership in and of the sector, taking its present needs and concerns as their starting point and looking deeply into the experience of colleagues in order to devise scripts for the future. As with all FETL’s work, the intention is not to offer definitive solutions but to engage readers in further thought and debate about issues crucial to the development of FE and skills in the UK, often drawing on ideas from other sectors and disciplines. Each monograph concludes with a number of key ways ahead for the sector.

THE AUTHORS



The Chartered Institution for Further Education is privileged to have been funded by the Further Education Trust for Leadership on this important and insightful piece of research which highlights the many challenges facing further education and the personal and professional impact that these can have on leaders in the sector.

There are many lessons to be learned from this work and it is our hope that it will set the scene for a greater understanding of the role of leadership within FE, the challenges associated with it, and the means by which we deal with perceptions of failure.

The community has a duty of care towards the hardworking and talented people who run our further education institutions; this Report gives us much to think about and wholly deserves our attention.

The Chartered Institution for Further Education would to express its sincere thanks to the following for their assistance in this research project:

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FOREWORD

This is the second of two papers on shame and shaming published by the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) in 2020. The first, published in May 2020, focused on shame in organisational life. This second, complementary Monograph considers shame from the perspective of individuals, and focuses in particular on how shame is produced and dealt with in struggling organisations, and the impact this has on 'shamed' leaders.

The focus is on further education, and further education leadership, in particular. The context in which sector leaders operate is important. The culture of constant reform, the combination of extreme financial constraint and high expectations, and our overbearing, sometimes unfair, system of accountability, all contribute to making FE leadership a high-stakes affair in which judgement is quick (and not always well-informed) and failure harshly and very publicly dealt with.

What emerges from these interviews with 'shamed' leaders is the huge personal and professional toll these sudden, and often very public, expulsions from leadership roles can take. It is also very evident that the harsh judgement visited upon professionals in the sector is unduly focused on faults in the individual, and pays far too little attention to the organisational and systemic pressures which drive their actions, notably the fast-changing nature of sector priorities which can result in a leader being vilified for taking a position previously in line with the expectations of their board of governors and the regulators.

This, and our previous report, should be read together. While the first provides a conceptual framework for thinking about shame and its role in organisational life, this report takes us deeper into the experiences of the shamed. It is the first time, to my knowledge, that a publication has given voice to these leaders, who often departed their roles, and in many cases the sector, feeling their side of the story had not been heard. As is evident from their testimony, the sense of loss and the damage done cast a long shadow, both personally and professionally.

I would like to thank the leaders who took part in the interviews. It took real courage to share in such depth their personal experiences of shame. I hope they will be taken note of within the sector and in government. We can no longer

afford to dispense with the skills and knowledge of leaders so casually. Nor can we persist with governance and regulatory arrangement that take so little account of the systemic pressures on leaders and that issue in such personal judgements when things go wrong, as things tend to in systems that function sub-optimally. We need urgently to think about these matters, as well as about the kind of support that leaders can draw on when things get difficult. I hope that this report, and its immediate predecessor, will be the start of a much-needed review of these processes.

Dame Ruth Silver is President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Further education colleges have, in common with the whole vocational and technical education sector, had to manage waves of change since becoming legally independent from local authorities in 1993. Colleges have adapted to repeated policy changes and frequent shifts in regulation and regulatory bodies, and have recently endured a period of acute funding constraint, exacerbating, in many cases, the legacy challenge of the earlier loss of capital funding. Over time, colleges have changed as organisations, with more diverse and complex operating models, and innovation and mergers¹ aiming to compensate for financial instability. College leaders have become used to navigating significant systemic change while also managing changes to their own roles.

Today's principal is a leader of learning: additionally, they are the chief executive of a complex institution. For many, the prospect of running out of cash, and facing, potentially, insolvency, has had to be as much of a priority as improving learning and life chances. College leaders have experienced the consequences of the more interventionist and public oversight regime that has emerged alongside this increasing financial strain. The number of colleges has fallen, as mergers have led to fewer, larger corporations. Principals and others have faced increased scrutiny and, for some, that scrutiny has led to job loss and public criticism, often with deep personal consequences. There has been genuine concern within the community of college leaders, and beyond, that intervention is operating in a punitive way, aiming to demonstrate accountability through changes in leadership, more than it is focused on improving learning outcomes.

The immediate inspiration for this research, commissioned by the Chartered Institute for Further Education (CIFE), was the tragic suicide of a young colleague in 2018.² The Institute's hope is that considering the personal impact on college leaders leaving – or being made to leave – jobs or being required to move roles, will help all involved in the sector reflect and act to counter the insidious impact of what the research terms 'shaming' in the way our system operates.

¹ Panchamia, N. 2012. Choice and Competition in further education. Institute for Government.

² <https://www.tes.com/news/former-principal-died-suicide-coroner-rules> [retrieved 27 March 2020].

College leaders expect and should face public scrutiny. That is inevitable and important for those entrusted with public money and shaping the life chances of adults and young people alike. Unacceptable behaviours and genuine under-performance is unacceptable and should not be tolerated. But we share and endorse the concern expressed by Dame Ruth Silver that too much of the criticism levelled at college leaders is 'not conducive to smart, open and learning-focused leadership'³ – precisely the kind of leadership that colleges really need in challenging times. We were also concerned that the personal cost of public shaming may both lead to a loss of vital experience as principals with strong previous track records feel forced to leave the sector, and act as a barrier discouraging talented people from seeking to step up as principals or from joining colleges from outside.

Two respected organisational psychologists, Ben Neal and Helen Shaw, were commissioned to undertake the research, so as to give as yet unheard voice to the experience of college leaders and in order to provide to all some deeper insights into the dynamics of shaming in the organisational life of further education colleges.

The research is grounded in the application of systems-psychodynamic theory: amalgamating the practice of psychoanalysis, the field of group relations, and open systems theory. As organisational consultants, the researchers' attention was on the effects of anxiety and stress in groups in and of organisations, including how the experience of individuals impacts on groups and in relation to overall systems. To inform their research, in-depth interviews were conducted with current and former college leaders who have served as principals and/or chief executives. The interviews were designed to cover issues such as:

- the extent to which shame is an internal dynamic or imposed from the outside;
- the impact of being shamed on individuals;
- how to mitigate shaming in organisations;
- how professionals and the organisations they lead can recover after experiences of shaming.

³ Silver, R. 2019. *Shame, Learning and Repair: Fostering compassion in organisational life*. Further Education Trust for Leadership, 2019

This approach allows the voices of those most affected by an experience to be heard, and to drive insights informed by theory. From these insights, several themes can be identified and suggestions proposed for lessons to be learned from this enquiry. We offer these as a spur for both reflection and improved appropriate action within colleges and across the oversight of the whole system.

This research puts before us lessons for all levels within the sector. It raises serious challenges as to how the sector prepares leaders to lead and how governing bodies support and work in purposeful concert with college leaders. It poses much needed, deep questions about the resilience of the sector's 'values' in the face of a highly public accountability system which appears targeted on college leaders. These issues embrace the professional relationship and decorum between colleges and their leaders – indeed, between organisations and individuals – moreover, the interviewees' stories directly raise challenges about the system within which college leaders operate. There are, crucially, implications for the focus and approach adopted by those holding the sector to account and for the overarching relationship between the sector and government founded on the principle of incorporation.

Giving voice to and making meaning of the testimony of those who have experienced shaming first-hand makes a powerful case for change with wisdom at its centre in order that learning can lead both role- and systems-leadership towards repair.

Methodology

As noted above, a number of current and former leaders who hold or had held roles as principals or chief executives took part in the interviews. The interviewees were a mixture of men and women, all with careers in the FE sector spanning multiple roles and several decades. All had experienced a challenging departure from their job roles and, in many cases, from the sector. Each interview lasted up to 1.5 hours and was conducted via online platform Zoom or telephone.

The interviews were semi-structured to enable participants to explore their experience and to understand more about the process in order to achieve deeper understanding of the dynamics of organisational shaming in the FE sector. They were informed by the Free Associative Narrative Interviewing method developed

by Hollway and Jefferson (2000). Guided by the psychoanalytic principle of free association, the interviews used a set of open questions (see *Annex 2*) designed to encourage participants to recall and share their experiences. It was important to the researchers that the participants be able to share openly without feeling encumbered by past judgements to which they might have been subject. The researchers paid attention not only to the emotional impact of what had been experienced in their working lives, but also the impact of recounting and re-living their stories. This meant allowing space and time to 'unpack' previously unprocessed material.

The research questions were organised into two groups. The first addressed external factors, which are easier to discern and to discuss, and the second, the more hidden dimension, which lies beneath the surface, in the internal world. The questions were formulated by working groups, with attention given to several domains in order to gather data which would represent:

- the system and context,
- personal and historical considerations,
- group and organisational dynamics,
- internal and external sources of shame,
- bullying and scapegoating,
- the political field,
- personal contributions and accountability.

The large initial list of potential questions was reduced to a short list that was refined by the project advisory body.

The researchers took detailed notes during and after the interview sessions, capturing both the participants' experiences and the thoughts and feelings they prompted. Themes were distilled from these notes and analysed in subsequent research meetings, allowing the researchers to collate the most prominent emerging themes while identifying additional ones.

WHAT COLLEGE LEADERS TOLD US

The further education leaders who took part in the interviews raised a range of issues and told stories illustrating the tension between their personal values and the actions they felt it necessary to take in order for their colleges to survive challenging financial circumstances. They also talked openly about the loneliness they experienced in their role as leader, how exposed and vulnerable they often felt, and the absence of appropriate support through institutional governance arrangements. Some of the leaders highlighted the wrenching losses experienced as a result of sudden exits allied to public shaming with no right of reply, and the loss of expertise and commitment to the sector that can follow.

They also indicated the existence of a gap between the professional values of leaders and those implicit in the regulatory frameworks through which the sector is governed. Some reported experiencing shame because of actions which they felt broke neither rules nor behavioural standards but which were deemed unacceptable by regulators. These issues raise important questions about our expectations of college leaders and what more the college sector can do to prepare, support and value leaders in a forced and forceful changing environment.

Regulation and 'the system'

The focus and impact of college regulation was a preoccupation of many of the participants, who noted that it did not always take adequate note of the financial and other constraints they operated in. Interviewees felt that leadership personnel change was the 'default' option in an intervention process that left them with the strong sense that the 'system' was unfair and seemingly designed to personalise and publicise shame, focusing blame on individuals and away from system-wide problems. While it would be rash to assume this view to be indicative of opinion across the sector, the consistency with which interviewees questioned the fairness of the oversight system should give colleges and their regulators pause for thought and repair. To a large extent, oversight and intervention processes rely for their credibility and confidence on high levels of respect and acceptance amongst the sector.

Participants noted the impact of reduced sector funding on college performance and its role in driving more active intervention by regulators. One noted that while resources were increasingly stretched, expectations remained 'impossibly high', creating a system in which 'only the strong survive and the weak go to the wall'. They also highlighted a lack of shared understanding within the system of the role and independence of colleges. This ambiguity and ignorance leads to potentially undesirable effects for individuals, staff and students alike, and for the further education system as an entity. The perception of independence was a factor in the level of alienation some college leaders felt towards 'the system' holding them accountable in such a deeply personal way. There was a lack of clarity as to how leaders should balance their own opinions and interpretations of policy with the government's right to set priorities for the sector, pointing to the need for increased dialogue among stakeholders to support the sector's adaptation to new interventions and authorities.

Shaming and the wider context

There was remarkable consistency in how the participants described the context in which they worked. Funding cuts had resulted in increased pressure to find and use alternative resources/funds, creating tension between the need to attend to quality and complex ideological questions about how to and whether to innovate and bring in third parties, entrepreneurial ideas and innovation that could challenge sector values. In addition, sudden changes in policy had led to strategies previously considered correct and effective being seen as not functional and the result of poor/weak leadership, despite the leadership strategies being considered on-task before the policy change took effect. This highlights the difficulty in being an 'accountable officer' in a quasi-market which is, at the same time, beset with constantly changing policy requirements from central government. Where leaders succeed, for example in turning around a struggling institution, they can become victims of their own success when they are given projects which are unrealistic and impossible to achieve.

Many of the participants described situations whereby their strategies for improvement had been approved and sanctioned by governing bodies and

regulators despite colleges struggling with spiralling debts, limited resources and sub-standard systems that made delivery difficult, if not impossible:

I believe that there is a fantasy about a degree of savagery that is required to lead FE, but it's actually the stripping of the sectors resources that make effective leadership an impossibility, rather than an insufficient degree of brutality in leadership approaches.

Sudden changes in emphasis or priorities could lead to accusations of faulty leadership:

The goalposts were constantly changing. It was an impossible task.

I feel I tried to change too much at the same time and, in hindsight, I would have narrowed my approach in line with the priorities of the governing body.

Agreements to focus on quality rather than finance, or finance rather than quality, for example, would suddenly be changed with little notice, resource, or scope to make the necessary adjustments. In some cases, after the departure of a leader, a replacement would be found, only to find they were up against the exact same limitations, suggesting that untenable systemic pressures were to some extent responsible for the perception of individual failures of leadership and the subsequent scapegoating and shaming that ensued.

This accords with the findings of Milgram (1963) and Zimbardo (2009) whose research shows how dysfunctional dynamics can emerge in systems operating in sub-optimal conditions, and who warn against being too quick to assume that dysfunctional dynamics should be attributed to a few 'bad apples'. To the contrary, Zimbardo (2009) argues that the conditions that create and sustain 'bad barrels' are a more appropriate field of enquiry, particularly when individuals concerned have no previous track record of impropriety or questionable work practice. This, of course, is not to deny that personal culpability is not also a significant factor. However, the degree to which similar processes played out, and the repetition of almost identical dynamics described by participants, suggest that, at the very least, systemic conditions need to be considered as a central pillar in explaining and considering what went wrong, and what

seems likely to continue going wrong, without challenge and review. As two participants wondered:

How is it possible that in one sector, so many previously successful leaders, with spotless records of achievement, are falling by the wayside?

Participants described a common pattern through which leading in this context can produce the dynamics that result in shame and shaming. The leader is caught out by/caught up in one of the contextual issues described above and comes under the scrutiny of the regulator. The regulator seems to put pressure on governing boards to collude in a diagnosis of weak, faulty or compromised leadership. This view is communicated to the press, which runs the story in strongly condemnatory terms, amplified still more harshly across social media. The legal framework around termination of employment (non-disclosure agreements) prevents challenge denying redress and allowing the shaming dynamic to play out indefinitely.

The impact on leaders

Participants talked openly about how the dynamics of shaming had affected them in their working and private lives. Most reported suffering a decline in their mental health and being prescribed anti-depressants or sleeping tablets. Some had considered suicide and described their perceived failure as a leader as the lowest point ever in their life.

I almost broke down; I just couldn't stop saying why are they doing this.

Partners and family also suffered reported mental and physical health consequences. Where, as is often the case, leaders do not clearly separate work role and personal life, the toll on families when that role is attacked, diminished or damaged, can be very significant:

It's difficult to be able to lead anymore. You need 100 per cent dedication. Day and night, every waking moment committed to the task. The family is part of that understanding. They sign up for that life also. They make huge sacrifices as well. The impact on family is significant.

Many leaders spoke of feeling isolated due to a combination of non-disclosure agreements and the fearfulness of colleagues unwilling to be associated with shaming experiences. They reported not having an opportunity to explain themselves to former colleagues. Relationships were severed abruptly, in some cases with immediate effect and consequences. It is difficult to convey the trauma leaders experience when, having spent decades in and responsible for complex systems and communities of learners and teachers, they abruptly lose their authority, voice and role, as well as their ability to connect with colleagues. In some cases, leaders felt that their values were under attack:

My most deeply held values are honesty and integrity so when I was accused of misusing public funds and it was suggested I was lacking in integrity and motivated by vanity, I was devastated.

Participants felt shamed by being named in the media and noted the impact this had on future opportunity – some reported not being shortlisted for much less senior roles, while others felt unable to contemplate applying for jobs in the sector. The contemporary practice of viewing the media profiles of job applicants means there is a lasting impact on interviewees long after the events that led to their rapid departure and/or shaming. Some participants reported how disturbing seeing their portraits/pictures in the media was and some declined to have their faces shown during interviews. Several interviewees now worked abroad having been unable to find work in the UK. It was common for participants to feel great regret that they could no longer contribute to the sector and they questioned the sector's loss of so much experience. Experiencing this sense of loss without the opportunity for closure made it difficult for participants to move on or to adequately process their experiences.

Participants spoke of a culture of fear and paranoia in the sector and the constant fear that what has been done to others could be done to you. They described meetings with civil servants and regulators as akin to character assassination:

[It was] quite shocking the way they publicly humiliated me in front of others in meetings – it was unethical and should never happen again because it will give license to others to behave in that way too. We went into an area review meeting to look at the data and I naively thought that is what everyone would do. But the process deteriorated – divisive and political, side meetings

– team disagreed with regulator. I didn't know what to do and now wish I had said something but I thought, 'Do I challenge, do I walk out?' and I didn't because my college needed a solution. I felt threatened and accused of being a poor leader – other people didn't know my history – we became toxic.

Leaders who had previously been lauded could quickly become pariahs. Meetings where strong arguments were made about the challenges and qualities of leadership still ended with recommendations to the governing body that a change of leadership was needed. There was a feeling that the regulator pressured governing boards to make examples of individuals as failures, with the threat of removing their powers if they failed to comply. One participant commented:

They audit colleges to death and try and find something to justify an already made decision to get rid of you.

Some participants felt there was a deliberate effort to reduce the size of the sector through a series of mergers that were destined to fail. This was seen as a conscious plan of civil servants and others. Several felt they had become victims of a larger dynamic through which the sector was being strategically 'shrunk' and 'run down', a process begun in government and facilitated by commissioners:

The commissioner is the instrument of the department, and is used to lend a sense of respectability to a ruthless process.

While it would be easy to dismiss such claims as conspiracy theory, designed to shift focus away from the shortcomings and failures of individuals not ready to consider their own blind spots and limitations, this narrative was a prominent feature of a number of the interviews. The similarities between the different dynamics described by participants points to importance of considering system and person as being in a dynamic relationship, rather than focusing simply on personal oversights or failings.

The leader and the person who leads

When there is over-identification between a person and their job role, the loss of position and status can be experienced as catastrophic, with significant negative impact on self and identity (Long et al, 2006). One way to understand shame, as distinct from guilt, is to consider in what way it is experienced in the internal

world. Guilt is commonly thought of as a negative experience relating to anxiety about something one has done, or an action that one has taken, or neglected to take, resulting in negative consequences for the self or others. Shame, on the other hand, relates more to the state of subjectivity itself, in that it is not what I have done that is lacking or substandard, it is me *as a person* who is not, or who has not been, good enough. To experience shame, therefore, is not merely to recognise that one has done a bad thing, but to feel oneself to be a bad person. In this way, to be organisationally shamed is to have one's identity and core sense of self questioned, attacked, and damaged. This is experienced as a fate far worse than having one's actions questioned and criticised.

You are left feeling depressed and anxious after a lifetime's work is called into question. Your personality is attacked and shamed.

Never had an experience like this ever before – shameful for myself.

Some of the themes that emerged powerfully from the interviews are relevant here. First, it was clear that participants strongly identified as people with their FE roles. They reported a complete commitment to their role which demanded also a complete commitment from partners and family members who would also need to accept constant long hours, overtime, and a dedication to work which left little time or space for anything other than the leadership task. Such over-identification with role leads to over-performance and what is commonly referred to as 'burn out', when performance demands supersede individual resilience.

Underpinning this over-identification with role was a personal set of core beliefs and values, which included integrity, honesty, authenticity, and a commitment to anti-discrimination and to providing opportunities for upward mobility for members of society who had fewer chances and more roadblocks to success. It is this collection of core values which form, to a large extent, our sense of self and sense of self-worth. When these values come under attack, then so too do our sense of who we are and what we are worth.

The distance between the person the participants experienced themselves to be and the person they were portrayed as being when things went wrong and they were blamed, appears to have damaged individuals at a very deep level, indeed at the level of identity itself. After leaving their roles, participants reported an acute drop in confidence in their ability, and spent a great deal of time searching

for faults in themselves or for things they might have missed that could have contributed to the events leading to their departure from the sector.

It really damaged confidence. My family suffered. My husband suffered.

You think about it all day. You think about it all night

A question of boundaries

Leaders and managers are responsible for considering the nature of the organisational boundary; what is coming into the system, what is happening in terms of conversion processes and what emerges on the other side. In open systems theory (Roberts, 1994), one could say that new students cross the boundary into a college, with a deficit in skill or knowledge. That deficit is addressed through learning and training, and the student then passes through the other side of the system, better equipped both personally and socially to progress.

This is clearly an oversimplification. Many other factors jostle for attention in a complex system, and balance, or at least compromise, must be sought between the needs of individual learners and the continued viability of the individual institution, both financially and ideologically.

In several interviews, participants reported being faced with a decision. In order to succeed in the task of education, and to meet increasing quality demands in a context of reduced funding, the only answer seemed to be to innovate. This is what Hirschhorn (1988) describes as mobilising aggression on the boundary. Despite being officially sanctioned and a reasonable response to environmental challenges, attempts to innovate often resulted in leaders being attacked, either because they appeared to be privileging their own ego over the core task and business of the college, or because it was felt that FE should not be doing deals with the private sector and that to do so was to erode firmly held ideals.

Hirschhorn (1988) argues that boundaries generate anxiety for organisations in three ways:

1. When inappropriately drawn, destabilising dependencies are created, which prevent people from accomplishing their tasks.
2. When appropriately drawn, real risks are highlighted.

3. When appropriately drawn, the boundary may stimulate the feared consequence of one's own aggression or aggression from others.

When considering boundaries and the anxiety generated in a system, we can see how tensions might arise between becoming complicit with a system which was unlikely to succeed, and the dangers of mobilising aggression to innovate and its associated pit falls.

Role, and specifically role definition, also plays a part. Many participants faced a bewildering series of challenges in defining the purposes of their roles and the tasks that they agreed to carry out and oversee during the sequences of events leading to their departures. For example, one participant had been given the 'all clear' to focus on the financial aspects of the college they were leading for the next few years, only to find that they became subject to brutal treatment when quality suffered as a result of the agreed strategy. Role is generally understood to follow task in effective organisational functioning. Following this simple formulation, it can easily be seen how vulnerable one might become to criticism and worse. Primary tasks subject to sudden change in systems can easily lead to questions about suitability and perceived quality of role.

It is important, finally, to consider the effective sanctioning of authority in relation to the domains of role, task and boundary. For effective authority to effect efficiency and progress in an organisation, it should be present in three distinct, but related domains. Ideally, authority should be sanctioned from above, below and within (Obholzer, 1994). Followers should be on board with strategy and generally accepting of the vision and personality of the leader. The leader should have a good enough sense of themselves as capable and deserving of a leadership role, and leaders should be fully authorised, resourced, and supported in their vision by the system that has appointed them, whatever that system might be.

The interviewees reported authority being undermined in different ways and at different times in each of the domains. Authority from above was probably most prominently attacked, with reports of highly persecutory encounters with regulators. In some instances, authority from below was withheld and mobilised as an attack. For example, individuals felt they were ganged up on by envious rival colleagues, who leveraged systemic conditions to undermine participants' positions. For some, racism was cited as a likely source of motivation:

I feel that I was ganged up on by the regulator and the department due to jealousy and racism and that they intended to destroy my reputation.

The processes and events to which participants were subjected would challenge any internal sense of authority (authority from within). However, in most cases, this was amplified through the trade press and social media. Most participants spoke of how their alleged deficiencies were reported relentlessly in the press, with accompanying portrait photographs. This was often recounted as a kind of 'character assassination', focused on the leader as a person, rather than on their role in a given system.

Some participants felt that, as leaders, they were subject to the envy of some other staff. Obholzer (1994) considers envy to be one of the key destructive organisational phenomena, especially regarding leadership. The accomplishments and potential of the leader are attacked often for personal reasons, but also, importantly, as a mobilisation of the group's unconscious and conscious wishes regarding the perceived potency of leadership and the desire for it to be diminished. Envy in organisational systems is most often directed at those on whom the system is most dependent. In an increasingly interdependent world in which collaboration is promoted as vital for survival, the potential for envious destructiveness is enormous.

Structure, accountability and governance

Many participants spoke about the contested role of boards of governors, the complexity of the accountability and governance structures in the sector, and whether they were sufficient for the changes in the model of operation. Governance was a theme in many interviews:

I have been thinking about accountability and the dynamics in the sector ... the relationship between accountability and autonomy. Principals are highly, seriously, seriously accountable as the accounting officer personally accountable to parliament. Such accountability goes with autonomy – you need autonomy in what you do.

It made me reflect on how fragile our governance is.

This is a scary story of official misbehaviour, the abuse of power without regulation or accountability and personal and professional spinelessness.

In systems psychodynamics, we think about the space in which the concepts associated with open systems theory, which are formal, structural and thus conscious aspects, meet concepts related to psychoanalytic theory, the unconscious processes of the organisation. In any consideration of the experience of leaders or the shaming of leaders, we cannot think about the unconscious processes without linking these to the scaffolding and structure of the organisations or system. For work that is challenging to be successfully done there needs to be requisite organisation (Jacques, 1989) – appropriate rules, structures and governance processes. The intersection of the conscious and unconscious aspects of organisational life is key to understanding whether there is appropriate organisational containment to allow the necessary work to be done, for reality to be as well understood as is consciously possible.

Loss to individuals and the system

One particularly painful recurring theme of the research was the narrative of unnecessary and damaging loss to individuals and the sector. Participants felt, almost universally, that they would not be able or willing to return to the sector and that any future contribution would take the form of consultation or some private initiative. The overwhelming feeling was that decades of organisational experience and knowledge had been unnecessarily lost from the sector and that this loss was not only a tragedy from the perspective of participants, but, more fundamentally, the FE sector itself, which loses knowledge, skills, leadership, and the ongoing contribution of individuals who spent decades in FE.

Participants also reported that after the shaming process, the sector effectively 'closed its doors' and that individual reputations had been 'stained' by the process of shaming, and particularly by its amplification through the trade press and, on occasion, the national press:

Other than my wife, no-one talked to me.

I feel a great sense of betrayal.

Can't think of any other sector that would treat people like this – never seen anything like it in 25 years.

And, of course, once a story has run it becomes a permanent and readily searchable part of the digital landscape, making it difficult for leaders to move on, either personally or professionally.

Exclusion, then silence

Many participants who left senior roles at the request of the FE Commissioner and their boards spoke of the shocking suddenness of their departure. One described it as 'the worst day of my life'.

The principal who puts forward strong views becomes the scapegoat.

I was told in conversation with people at the top of the sector, very top people 'we will support you' whatever happens.

No-one would take on the debt so the government decided to bail us out but the process means the leadership has to go, irrespective. I could see it coming but I was promised by civil servants there would be a different outcome – but leadership and ministers change and knowledge is lost and history ... and relationships.

Analogous with other public sector organisations – NHS is a good example – leaders are named and shamed.

Often, leaders were required to leave within days (sometimes hours) in circumstances where their settlements required no contact with staff.

I felt numb and isolated and let down. It was a bereavement in a way – I had looked after the college and the community better than my own finances.

These abrupt endings had a distressing impact. Many spoke of it in terms of 'bereavement', frequently reporting feeling devastated, without hope, cut off and abandoned. Their former colleagues in the sector subtly and not so subtly distanced themselves as if there was danger of contagion. Several experienced principals spoke of being undermined or 'thrown to the wolves' by senior colleagues. The absence of safe, supportive areas in which to think about and work through complex working relationships with colleagues may have helped sour relationships and promote envy. Competitive feelings from peers who may also have been under the spotlight caused splitting and distancing that mirrored the way many felt treated once they had left the sector.

Process came in ... we mirrored the national picture but others in the sector who had valuable assets said we should not be bailed out – but they were not taking our context into account.

Some felt there was an ideological attack on the values and basis of their work. Lauded and sometimes decorated leaders, recognised by peers and politicians, were often invited to take on struggling institutions where the true state of affairs was not apparent until they were in post.

It was very precarious and it was a lot worse when I got there than I had been led to believe.

Sometimes they took on projects and then policy changes were made that meant their tried-and-tested solutions were no longer as successful as before. Often, solutions proposed by the centre were plainly unsuitable in the college's context, for example,, the sale of land assets to realise capital would not work in areas of deprivation.

I kept all the relevant agencies and government informed with documented evidence of what was happening but the college was still in a weak state. The situation was exacerbated by government policy – FE at the bottom of pile for funding and especially if you have a large part time adult learning provision.

People think you can sell land at the value it is in Westminster and it is just not the case. We do not command London prices.

While many leaders had adapted to the market and sought new revenue sources to retain the ability to offer FE, there was still a feeling that, with their public sector values and ethos, they were considered no longer fit for purpose.

What could be done differently?

A number of participants made suggestions for change in the sector to strengthen and encourage future leaders and support existing leaders. These included proposals for leadership training for those who move from academic roles to leadership and for regular and ongoing supervision/coaching/learning opportunities for leaders. Some participants had found support in learning sets and leadership groups outside the sector or from former mentors or coaches. Evidently, it is important to promote a culture where leaders can ask for and receive help and a learning culture exists at all levels. As one participant noted:

Professionally there is no-one there for you – AoC, everyone pulls away, no ministers, no MPs visit, peers aren't there, no-one speaks to you. The phone

goes dead. One or two people phoned me for consultancy but that was it. I was gone overnight.

Further work with small groups of leaders exploring some of the issues raised in this study could prove fruitful. Enabling spaces thorough coaching or group discussion where some of the theoretical ideas in this model could be explored to support the development of an internal consultative stance to support the leadership task alongside a different lens on the challenges within the system could be beneficial. There is huge wisdom in the sector and the views and creativity of former and current leaders needs to be nurtured and valued, while also recognising the need for change to meet the external context.

Given that the exercise of power in organisational systems has changed and is more distributed through systems (Stokes and Dobson, 2020), leaders increasingly need to be able to reach out to those who are in opposition to their vision and to work with them in a contested work world where loyalty and unity around shared values are more precarious. A mechanism for sustained dialogue between all stakeholders would be helpful.

Reducing the drivers of division, polarisation and increased anxiety which are at least in part responsible for the increase in shaming in the sector requires us to address fundamental questions about the future of colleges and their relationship with government. The record of personal experiences and the analysis contained in this research provide compelling reasons for the sector to collectively tackle these undesirable impacts on individuals and on colleges.

REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The interviews carried out for this project testify to the personal impact of the public shaming experienced by some leaders in the FE sector, including long-standing, experienced and honoured leaders with strong track records leading good and outstanding institutions Their experiences bear witness to the potential cost to individuals and to the sector. The analysis suggests the need for everyone involved in the regulation and governance of the sector to reflect on the *context* in which shaming has occurred, the *mechanism* by which regulation and intervention has led to shaming experiences, and the profound *impact* shaming has on individuals.

If we want a culture where 'people feel able not only to highlight misconduct but also admit when they are struggling to deliver against expectations and ask for support'⁴ we need to shift the dial on attitudes and behaviours across the system. Reflections for the sector and its regulators arising from this research are set out below. While these may be relevant across the system, it is also important that everyone, as individuals, considers whether personal behaviours and attitudes also need to adapt to stop further shaming experiences and create a culture, focused on learners, that we can all be proud of.

The first set of reflections relate to the *experience of college leaders*, including principals and governing bodies. If the ability to respond to environmental change and constant disruption is one of the most important factors when considering contemporary leadership styles, then college leaders must be well equipped to operate in such an environment. The wider governance and leadership systems of the sector also need to be fit for this modern context. In particular:

- **Preparing for leadership:** The sector, and individual governing bodies, need to consider what more can be done to ensure aspiring principals are well prepared for leadership, ensuring that leadership teams as a whole have appropriate finance, business and commercial skills to

⁴ Silver, R. 2019. Shame, Learning and Repair: *Fostering compassion in organisational life*. Further Education Trust for Leadership.

support principals with an education background to run modern colleges. Governing bodies should review whether the skills sought and tested during selection give enough weight to adaptiveness and to leaders' resilience in the face of challenging public scrutiny. They should review succession plans and development needs of potential leaders, and adequately support new college leaders as they transition into exposed roles in ways which may not have been done in the past. As the research suggests, there should be regular and ongoing supervision, coaching and learning opportunities for college leaders. Governing bodies thus have an important role in ensuring busy leaders make time for their own development.

- **Governance:** Many interviewees appear to have had little sense that, under intense pressure, governing bodies and principals operated effectively as a single team, sharing accountability for the organisation. We can have empathy for the challenges volunteer governing bodies face, and their commitment to further education, while also questioning whether the governance system inherited at incorporation remains appropriate for the modern complex, diverse and higher-risk college. The sector and regulators should review the structure of governance for further education colleges, while regulators also need to consider how far governors are also accountable, alongside principals, for any under-performance in individual colleges. Decisions on leadership change should recognise that boards are accountable too.
- **Leaving with dignity:** Managed well, departure can recognise accountability and the need for new and different leadership. Sometimes it can be the right thing for individual leaders too, but far more consideration must be given to managing departure with dignity. Improper behaviour is a different matter, but for other cases the eloquent testimony of interviewees about the impact of sudden and total separation from their roles should give governing bodies pause for thought. Failure will seldom, if ever, be a matter of a single individual's responsibility. College leaders' health and wellbeing should be vital concerns for governing bodies. Sudden dislocation and isolation took their toll on many of those interviewed for this research. In particular, the appropriateness of using non-disclosure agreements in such cases should be reviewed, given wider public

concern about the mechanism and the ongoing implications for further employment chances when departing leaders are gagged and unable to counter public and media attacks.

The second group of reflections ask those involved in college oversight to consider how to reduce both the unintended consequences of shaming as a by-product of *the intervention process* and the underlying levels of anxiety about that process:

- **Transparent decision-making:** Regulators need to build college leaders' confidence that decisions genuinely distinguish between institutional context and individual performance. The research suggests that many affected college leaders consider that context is not recognised in judgments about whether leadership change is needed. Some interviewees also believe a perceived desire to reduce the number of colleges is driving recommendations to change leadership. Such views might be expected, but greater transparency about the basis of regulators' judgments is important to build confidence within the sector, to attract high-calibre individuals to leadership positions, and for the longer-term legitimacy of the regulatory approach. Not all leaders can adapt to changing environments, but most good leaders are unlikely to become poor leaders in a short space of time. It is incumbent on regulators to be transparent and open to challenge about the basis of judgements that leadership needs to change.
- **Retaining expertise:** The research highlights how the cumulative effects of public shaming leads to people exiting the sector or feeling it necessary to seek employment abroad. As well as the personal impact, the resultant loss of expertise to the sector is concerning. The regulators should consider whether the long-term health of the sector is best served by this approach. They and governing bodies should reflect on their criteria for whether and how to make leadership changes. Over time, the sector's regulators should also review the impact of leadership and structural change on subsequent college performance, to guide future decision-making.
- **Communication and re-employment:** How problems at colleges, and leadership changes, are communicated to staff and, crucially, to the trade media is important. Nuanced communication is essential to reflect the different circumstances and wider contexts in which decisions to change leadership are made. Regulators and colleges should review how leadership

changes are communicated and briefed to the media. Wherever possible, judgements and communications should recognise the contribution of departing leaders who will have dedicated their professional life to improving life chances for many. College governing bodies also have a role to play by being open to interviewing and appointing leaders who have left other colleges, but it is harder for them to do so if all departures are handled and reported without nuance or context, from one perspective, and without a right of reply.

The third area of reflection covers the broader question of the *underlying relationship between colleges and government*. Further education colleges are used to being an 'adaptive' part of the education system. Formal independence and responsiveness to government policy have gone hand in hand, but frequent change has also created frequent challenge about the sector's fitness for purpose. More direct intervention by central government and its arm's-length bodies has escalated as financial risk in the sector has increased at the same time as further policy changes have been introduced. This shift raises broader questions about whether college independence is (or should be) a shibboleth or a chimera, and whether there is a shared understanding between the sector and government about what college independence means in today's further education environment.

This research joins the dots between values held by former leaders in the sector, the impact of changing policy requirements and finances, and the resulting tension between college autonomy and centralised direction and intervention. It illustrates how different attitudes to college independence can increase the level of alienation some college leaders feel towards 'the system' holding them accountable. And it helps us reflect on the personal challenges leading through such ambiguity can create. If, as seems likely, policy change and financial restraint continue to go hand in hand, these systemic and individual challenges are likely to increase. There is no easy solution to these tensions and no mythical 'golden age' to which the college sector can return. We do, however, think it important for there to be sustained dialogue between college leaders, sector groups, regulators and government to help bridge the gap between a sector in which autonomy is deeply ingrained and government concerns driving the intervention process, with the effects so strongly articulated by our interviewees.

A sector in which motivations and expectations are shared is one in which the testimony of those interviewed for this project should become a thing of the past. The health of the sector and of those who work in it would be better for the absence of shaming from our organisational culture. We should treat all college leaders and staff with dignity and respect. As these interviews make clear, the cost of not doing so can be too high. We can, and must, do better.

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ANNEX 1

Our approach: A note from the researchers

Systems psychodynamics is an interdisciplinary field amalgamating a triad of influences: the practice of psychoanalysis, the theories and methods of the field of group relations, and the task and boundary awareness of open systems theory.

The use and practice of the systems-psychodynamic model

The application of Melanie Klein's and Freud's ideas to institutional life are especially useful. As organisational consultants, as opposed to clinicians, however, our attention is on the effects of anxiety, stress, and the resulting defences in groups and organisations, rather than individual patients.

We are particularly interested in the most primitive defences and responses, such as splitting and projection,⁵ and the effects of aggressive drives, manifesting as envious attacks, or 'anti-task' aspects of rivalry and competition.

Our model tracks the process of the individual meeting the group and then the group meeting the system, in a context which is increasingly turbulent, fast moving, disruptive and subject to fast adaptations to changes in environment. One might say that the ability to respond to environmental change and constant disruption is one of the most important factors when considering contemporary leadership styles. These styles can be said to draw on eco-systems analogous more to the interconnectedness of a coral reef, than the closed boxes of the first industrial revolution (Western, 2008). A humble aim in this practice can be the hope that by changing or effecting part, or parts of a complex, interrelated system, a ripple effect may alter the whole system in previously unpredicted ways.

We all recognise that we spend our lives inhabiting ever-expanding and more complex groups – From parents, family and siblings to school, work, and society. It

⁵ Splitting: A process where excessive anxiety produces a polarized, simplistic world view, characterized by lack of flexibility, nuance, and toleration of difference. Projective identification: A psychological mechanism whereby unwanted aspects of the self are located, in fantasy, in another person or group, with the potential for the person or group to identify with the content of the projection.

is because of this that our interest is in not only the directly observable structures and functions of these groups, including the management of boundaries, the definitions of roles, and the exercise of authority and power in organisational structures. We must also take into consideration the unconscious aspects of group life, analogous to unconscious processes that hinder the progress of individuals who seek treatment in psychoanalysis, and other forms of therapy and self-development.

We work in the belief that organisations pursue unconscious goals alongside conscious ones and that these affect both efficiency and stress levels in staff. It is considered in our tradition that the social (systemic) and psychoanalytic are considered together and not in isolation if change is to be possible where structural and unconscious functions overlap.

However, working only psychoanalytically may heighten awareness and sensitivity in individuals, but will not on its own create conditions where these new insights can be made use of, resulting in greater anxiety and depression, and disturbance. Conversely, if only social aspects are attended to and a two-dimensional blueprint for change is affected, there remains a danger that, without addressing the unconscious needs of the system, the new structure is likely to fail.

With these conditions in mind we must remind ourselves of the importance of deriving understanding from as diverse a range of experiences as possible, to avoid 'role saturation' and risk being swept away by the institutional defences one will be subject to in any system. One should endeavour to be sure that no one single role is too easily mobilised in isolation, and, for consultants and coaches, that one avoids being positioned, or taking up the position of substitute leader or manager.

The limitations of the approach are important to note. As mentioned previously, the heightened sensitivity being gained, without the structural support to make it useful. Character assassination: the theory must not be misused to disparage character and impugn motives. This makes real the possibility of systemic problems being attributed to individual pathology and can support rather than illuminate the dynamics of bullying and scapegoating. Finally, not giving adequate attention to the real world conscious achievements

of the enterprise. The bias of the consultant can easily give way to excessive focus on the experience of the staff, who may well be suffering, but if achievement is not properly acknowledged, one can end up disparaging and discounting the work of others.

The outsider perspective is important. Membership of, or association with an institution, makes it harder to understand and observe dynamics in which we play a part. We are usually, as insiders, caught up in the anxieties and defences that are present and share the common habitual ways of seeing things and rely on 'holy writ'. Newcomers can often see more clearly but are seldom invited to comment. Soon they are either assimilated or rejected as they too require protection from anxiety, including that of potentially upsetting the established group and its order.

The consultancy stance described is one where practitioners resist trying to be expert in other fields or professions, but rather, employ skills in order to liberate the experience of group life and its complexities and challenges.

ANNEX 2

The interview questions

Can you tell us about your experience of working life and why you are participating in this project?

In what way or ways do you feel you have been shamed?

Is shame an internal dynamic or is it imposed from the outside?

What are the consequences of being shamed?

From a personal, professional, and organisational perspective?

What does being shamed do to a person?

What could be done to mitigate against shaming in organisations?

What are the specific factors that allow shaming to happen in your field?

Is shaming organisational violence?

Does the shaming process trigger past experiences of feeling shame or being shamed?

Have you ever been a perpetrator of organisational shaming?

How does a person recover after being shamed / managed out / expelled?

Have you lost confidence in your ability?

Have you lost confidence in your sense being a good person?

In what ways has being shamed affected the progress and development of your career?

Do you consider yourself to have been ganged up on? How did the gang form and what was the gang's purpose or objective?

Why do we see the dynamics of shaming in your sector?

What is the future like after shaming?

Was the shaming public or private? Can you describe it?



M O N O G R A P H

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