



## Leadership in LAS: Beginning a conversation

**Liz Horrocks**

University of South Australia

*liz.horrocks@unisa.edu.au*

**Abstract:** *As a person new to the university and to the position of team leader of the Learning Advisers it has become clear that there are real challenges yet many potential opportunities for Language and Learning Advisers. Although there is an abundance of available literature on the roles, responsibilities and directions of LAS advisers across the nation to critique and reflect upon there appears to be none on the leadership of LAS. Therefore, the intention of this paper is to start a tentative beginning conversation about this. The paper looks at the role of leadership of LAS at a university in South Australia and identifies some of the practices that needed to be addressed at the beginning of my appointment. Two leadership theories are considered as potential operational frameworks, some initial actions and their limitations outlined. Tentative conclusions that could be drawn are that with leadership a team can be influenced, motivated, stimulated and mentored. The vision for the future should be based on the fundamental values and culture of Learning Advisers as part of the university but also reflect powerful personal motivators such as values, aspirations and hopes.*

**Key words:** *leadership, professionalism, learning advisers*

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the importance of leadership of academic Learning Advisers at a university in South Australia and to describe how I began in the position of leader of this team in early 2005. The intention is to begin a conversation about leadership in LAS that will hopefully be expanded in the future. Although I am writing from the perspective of one university, most Australian universities employ either academic or general staff in either centralized services, alone or in faculty-based positions. The very nature of their roles is diverse, developmental not remedial and different to the role of other academics. The multiplicity of the role includes working with academic staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students and with personnel from other disciplines such as counsellors, disability officers and international student advisers in a variety of ways.

From an historical perspective the first Study Skills tutors in South Australia were employed at South Australian College of Advanced Education (SACAE) in 1985 and similar positions established later at the South Australian Institute of Technology (SAIT). The tutors were all on short-term, part-time contracts at that time but later reclassified as Lecturer B. After amalgamation in 1991 to form this university, the new team were called Study Advisers and continued with that title until 1999. In 1999 the positions were rewritten, redefined and retitled Learning Adviser. The new team of Learning Advisers from 1999 consisted of staff who had had all worked together previously and had to win their positions in a restructuring process. Currently in the team there are 9 full time academic Learning Adviser positions and 3 casual staff for approximately 30,000 students in the university.

The structure of the university comprises four metropolitan campuses and two rural campuses. Because of the multi campus nature of the university the organizational structure is a matrix management system that was introduced in 2003. Matrix management gives each team member two or more leaders and means that Learning Advisers might report to a team leader as well as a Coordinator of Teaching and Learning although the team leader has primary responsibility for the team. There are approximately two learning advisers on each campus and their roles and expertise are diverse. Each has a leadership specialization that includes on-line, language, international and Non English Speaking Background (NESB) and equity.

Most Learning Advisers are currently engaged in study ranging from Graduate Diploma to Doctoral studies.

As a newcomer to the team it was evident that Learning Advisers have significant expertise in areas such as language, international and NESB, production of online resources and developing course specific resources and are progressive in the work they do with students and staff. Some of the practices that I observed that needed to be addressed included the included improving the morale of the team, strengthening the research profile to attract funding and continually improving teaching and learning performance. An accurate and appropriate strategy to evaluate the effectiveness of the work of learning advisers will need to be developed. Rhoden and McLean (2002, p. 234) write that evaluating effectiveness, efficiency and success to enhance performance and ensure survival can prove challenging but it is necessary to do. Although Learning Advisers do work together with different teams in the university a more concerted effort is achievable. This includes, for example, Learning Advisers and Professional Developers jointly attending meetings with school personnel or jointly delivering professional development sessions together. More opportunities need to be sought for Learning Advisers to work with academic staff to embed inclusive teaching and learning methodologies, jointly develop resources and deliver workshops. In this way Learning Advisers may become academic partners and dislodge the 'remedial' or 'fix-it' tag that is still prevalent (Craswell, & Bartlett, 2001; Jansen, 2001). This may be ameliorated by the imminent inauguration of a LAS professional body at the 2005 LAS Conference in Canberra (Chung, 2005; Zeegers, 2003) the development of which will potentially provide significant opportunities for the LA profession as a whole.

## **Role of leader**

The role of leader of the team within the university is important on many levels. Leading a team within this environment requires an awareness of both internal and external pressures and constraints and the ability to deal with and lead in an environment of continuous change. External and pressures include a renewed emphasis on teaching and learning outcomes, and a framework for research in which all Australian Government funding is either competitive or performance-based

(Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004). Although there are constraints 'a leader should not be an unthinking agent of a corporate agenda but use a variety of strategies to question and reshape' the way things are done (Sinclair, 2005, p. 14). The following characteristics were taken from a recent discussion with the Learning Advisers and reveal some of their thoughts as well as mine about what a leader should bring to the job. On a practical level the leader needs to link with what is happening on committees across the university to ensure that what is on the university's political agenda is known. Work can then be proactive rather than reactive and remedial. The leader needs to be a visionary, confidently lead change that is linked to university priorities in close collaboration with the Learning Advisers.

At the campus level the leader needs to be the link person for the multi-campus, but for the team, represent the team as academics on mixed general staff/academic management committees and defend or promote the team in such forums. At the team level the leader should be a contact person for the team who is respected and who respects the team members. The leader coordinates the energies, keeps the team on track and keeps the members looking at the horizon for new directions. The leader must know the strengths and areas that need strengthening of all the Learning Advisers and know how to motivate and encourage so that the team feel valued, are productive and encouraged to achieve a high potential. There can be a tendency for staff with a strong campus orientation and workload to just see what is happening on their particular campus. Therefore, it is helpful and constructive to have a nominated leader to counter that although it could be argued that the term team leader for academics is in itself problematic. On every level the leader needs to advocate for and promote the team.

In a review of the LAS literature many articles outline the roles and responsibilities of Learning Advisers (Caterall, 2003; Hicks, & George, 2001; Jones, Bonanno, & Scoulter, 2001; Morgan, 2001; Zeegers, 2003) yet there appears to be none on the professional leadership of LAS. Since starting at this university from a background in public education, I have been able to delve into collegial theory and transformational leadership theory and decide which will underpin the work of the team and provide an operational model.

## **Collegial theory and transformational leadership theory**

Leadership is different to management. By definition management seems to be transactional where managers are in a position of authority. Many in the university seem to be wary of managerialist approaches and are concerned about the shift from collegial to more hierarchical models of operation (Hellawell, & Hancock, 2001, p. 185). In a 2001 study of the changing roles of middle managers these authors found that managers reported that although it has its down side, collegiality is the most effective form of decision making. More autocratic styles of management do not suit higher learning because of their directive nature can cause lowered morale and general inhibition (Southeast Missouri State University, 2002). Collegial theory is dynamic, self-regulating and self-organising with peers working together to share expertise balancing individual curiosity with the common goal of advancing knowledge (Fister, & Martin, 2005, p. 5). The premise for this sounds very positive but it could potentially be fraught with difficulties and lead to people becoming cloistered and inward looking instead of sharing with colleagues. One factor that may cause this fragmentation is physical location or separation of staff (Hellawell, & Hancock). As well, in any organization there are; those who push their own agendas, those that are reluctant to confront those not pulling their weight, and meetings held that are held infrequently or too often with a lack of purpose. The concern is that without discipline on the part of all involved and a leader designated for the task, dysfunction may result. There are dysfunctional departments in universities that show that the collegial, democratic structure does not always work because it relies on trust, professional expertise and people working for the good of the organization as a whole (Polanyi, as cited in Fister, & Martin). I believe positive collegial decision making can operate well in a Transformational Leadership framework.

Transformational leadership, the literature tells us, has proved most successful (Bennis, & Nanus, 1997; Walumbu, Wang, Lawler, & Shi, 2004). I like the emphasis on commitment, raising one another to a higher level of motivation, building and enjoying good relationships with the team over the long term based on the values of the team and the university. Commitment to shared values often overcomes resistance to change. With this type of leadership, supervision is less important because there is trust in the competence of others and professional development

available when it is needed. In this type of collegial environment change occurs because there is often a change of attitude. Although it might sound trite to say it, the change in attitude comes when people are valued. Research has shown that transformational leadership is positively related to organizational commitment and job satisfaction and that there is a high degree of trust and loyalty leading to a willingness to stay with an organization (Walumbu, Wang, Lawler & Shi).

Although not perfect, and some would say 'grossly theoretically undernourished...with 'all the hallmarks of a religious crusade' (Gronn, 1995, p. 14), Transformational Leadership theory, has evolved over the last 30 years beginning with the work of James McGregor Burns (1978) a pioneer in the leadership field. His work has since been built on by researchers such as Bass (1985) and Bennis and Nanus (1985). Burns believes that a leader acknowledges and deals with immediate wants but also 'elevates people by vesting in them a sense of possibility, a belief that changes can be made and that they can make them' (Burns, 2003, p. 239). For Burns motivation is key. This theory has been challenged by critical post modernists who call for 'interpretative, narrative and existential methods to be used to explore the transformations' i.e. dialogue (Boje, 2000, p. 29). I have and will continue to provide opportunities for dialogue in teaching and learning so that we can debate issues, come up with new ideas and solutions, challenge and provoke thinking and ask questions.

In choosing a model it was critical to choose one that was ethical, enabled responsiveness to developing people, building communities of practice, building capacity and setting directions. Transformational leadership theory promised to be appropriate for this, although to be used without with the religious zeal mentioned by the critics. It was also important to acknowledge how emotional intelligence complements effective leadership. Goleman (1995) built on the work of Salovey and Mayer (1990) to develop five characteristics of emotional intelligence which complement the four leadership strategies described below. These include: understanding one's emotions, knowing how to manage them, emotional self-control (including the ability to delay gratification), empathy and managing relationships. It has been suggested by Barkling et al., (2000) that people with strong emotional intelligence are more likely to use transformational behaviours.

By trialling the four leadership strategies that Bennis and Nanus (1997) identified in a study of ninety top leaders a provisional framework was provided that has enabled me to work collegially to earn trust and credibility as a new leader. To be specific these strategies include:

1. attention through vision
2. meaning through communication
3. trust through positioning
4. the deployment of self.

I have used these strategies to identify actions that will build relationships, understand issues, identify peoples' strengths, passions and areas where they need strengthening. In reflecting on the use of this model it has been possible to focus on immediate needs and wants and begin to think of possible changes that may be made. The challenge is to take on the institutional agenda and as a team we are thinking creatively about that.

Some of the beginning actions that have been taken are outlined below as well as a reflection of the some of the limitations of working in this way.

### **1. Attention through vision**

The creation of a vision is the building of a bridge from the present to the future of the team within the university. Because the team needed a clear sense of purpose and direction a team planning session was held soon after I began in the position. The purpose of this session was to envisage a two year plan, challenge thinking, create team spirit and develop strategies for change. An attractive off campus venue was found and speakers invited including the Director, the Coordinator Teaching and Learning Services and the Coordinator International Staff & Student Services who were able to inform the team of the future directions of the university. This was critical to set the scene for planning.

Team values were established by the team at the outset of the session and included:

- **Respect** for:

- each other
- students
- different ideas and perspectives
- **Creativity/Innovation**
  - positive response to change
- **Collegiality**
  - celebration
  - sharing expertise
  - support
  - work valued and recognised
  - sense of humor
- **Honesty, integrity, ethics.**

Then a story boarding technique was used to capture the team's interest and attention. Although this highly interactive and visual technique is used to build animations and movies it was clear that the underpinning principles would promote creative and analytical thinking and could be adapted really well for our purpose. The process is based on brainstorming and demands a high level of participation where the views of every participant are valued. It is a conversation of possibilities and realities (Arizona Department of Commerce, 1995, p. 1).

The first step was to define the task and it was decided by the team that we were developing a two year plan or map of our work which was responsive and relevant to the university, the students and to us. It was decided that planning was crucial and as a team we agreed on the maxim 'fail to plan - plan to fail'.

The second step was to gain clarity about why we were doing what we were doing. Clear direction, shared goals, aligning our goals with that of the university leading to



the strengthening of the team, strengthening the status of the unit in the university and envisaging new possibilities were all agreed reasons for planning in this way.

The limitations of planning in this way included the possibility of planning to do too much or nominating things that sounded good at the time and then not following through. As well, it could be easy for the plans to be forgotten in people's busy lives. Therefore, as a team we have decided to report against the progress of the plan at our team meetings and make adjustments if needed if workload becomes an issue.

## **2. Meaning through communication**

Without effective, open communication even the best plans may not eventuate. Communication is vital in leadership and a leader must be an excellent listener and a perpetual learner (Bennis, & Nanus, 1997). The vision articulated at the team planning session has been communicated to others to gain support for our work from those at a higher level.

On another level, as soon as possible after my arrival individual interviews were conducted with each team member, partly to begin building relationships but also to identify what was happening. The questions were taken from David Langford's (2004) 'Parking Lot' and they were: what is going well, what needs improvement, what are the issues and what are some questions that you may like to ask? The themes that emerged from the interviews were consistent with the LAS literature and clearly showed that the Learning Advisers were a strong and supportive team who had some concerns but many ideas for improvement and innovation. The information gave me a strong base on which to build.

Limitations of this strategy could be that people do not actually say what they really want to but what you might like to hear or if they have been frank they may not wish the findings to be disclosed. Issues that arise may not then be resolved.

Other communication areas that needed improvement were between the team and staff external to the team. Therefore, regular meetings with other teams and their leaders have been set up to work out ways of working together and communicating with each other. The problem there is that people are already busy and therefore meetings need to be purposeful and kept to a minimum. Since the meetings with

other teams have begun, however, there appears to be more cohesion with the wider unit and there is more streamlining of work where before there was overlap. For example two sessions have been planned on assessment and Internationalisation. All the teams will attend and share what they do so that work is not replicated but combined where possible.

### **3 and 4. Trust through positioning and Deployment of Self**

This third strategy could be restated as 'practice what you preach' (Fairchild, 1990). By positioning myself as predictable, reliable, persistent and consistent and acting in a manner consistent with the professed goals of the team I believe I have earned the trust of the colleagues with whom I work both within and without the team. I have also committed to 'stay the course' in the position. The final strategy Deployment of Self relates to the development of self through positive self-regard. Self-deployment could be restated as 'do as you would be done by' and relates to accepting people as they are, learning from mistakes, treating people courteously and trusting others. The leader must be a good communicator and confident of success. The way a leader responds to failure or setbacks is critical

### **How are staff responding?**

So far the staff appears to be responding positively to this kind of leadership but it is still very early days. I intend to take an objective, longitudinal and considered approach to evaluation and will seek advice about how best to go about this. At the end of the year though I would like to ask of the team the David Langford questions that I asked at the beginning to gauge whether there has been any improvement for the team. For the purpose of this paper I asked the team if they would like to make comments on how they are responding to leadership based on Transformational Leadership strategies after 5 months and have included some below and aligned them with the four strategies.

**Attention through vision** - *You provide opportunities for our professional voices to be heard - particularly at planning day where our visions for learning advice now form the 'spine' of our operations for the next two years.*

**Meaning through communication** - *I feel valued as a staff member and equitable colleague because I am being listened to, know can discuss any issue, and know that opinions being sought all contribute to the valuing of staff.*

**Trust through positioning** - *Your collaborative and dialogic, honest leadership and demonstrating a sense of humour has an affect of creating a vision, building a cohesive team, and respecting other positions. It is Important to work within the institutional constraints to provide solid experiences of team building - and this has already happened!*

**Deployment of Self** - *I feel valued like I haven't felt in ages and I feel energised by the positive attitude you exude. I feel I have short term and long term goals and feel supported enormously in reaching them.*

## **Conclusion**

How does this relate to the LAS profession as a whole? The intent of this paper was to begin a conversation about leadership in LAS and ask questions such as: how does open communication play a part in leadership? what is leadership? what would influence your choice of leadership theory? what leadership models do others use? are there more valuable alternatives to this way of working? and what are some responses to Collegial and Transformational leadership? I look forward to discussions about some of these questions at the 2005 LAS conference in Canberra with LAS professionals. In the next two years with the team I will endeavour to influence, motivate, mentor, evaluate and present progress in a paper written for the 2007 LAS Conference.

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