

Cascading Leadership

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*'My overall reflection is that it [Cascading Leadership] is an excellent product. Both the intent **and** the implementation has been very good, and I commend The King's Fund for coming up with the concept.'* (Cascading Leadership 'Consultant')

Purpose of this paper

This paper sets out the background to the Cascading Leadership programme; the distinctiveness of the 'offer'; key outcomes; and the key factors that need to be taken into consideration to help ensure a successful leadership programme of this type in the future. It draws on the learning from the various iterations of the programme run between 2017 and 2023.

About Cascading Leadership

Cascading Leadership was a highly successful free (at point of delivery) leadership development programme for health and social care charities designed and delivered by The King's Fund (www.kingsfund.org.uk). The positive response to it from all those taking part, illustrates the need and appetite for leadership programmes of this type.

It was created to increase the capability of leaders within the health and social care sectors through a peer-to-peer approach to better deliver services and address challenges through a distinctive leadership offer.

Cascading Leadership was piloted in 2016, following a small-scale pathfinder in Scotland. Initially, experienced leaders of health and social care charities ('Consultants') who had been through the GSK Impact Awards programme (www.kingsfund.org.uk/projects/gsk-impact-awards) were trained by The King's Fund to hone their coaching skills in order to support leaders ('Partners') with less experience. In later iterations of the programme, Consultants were recruited through a widely publicised recruitment process, and also included those who had participated before or former partners who gravitated towards the role of Consultant - the alumni.

¹ m2 was appointed as learning partner for the Cascading Leadership programme in 2016. In that time, we produced a number of reports and thematic learning papers; our final evaluation report was presented in June 2020. www.m2consultants.uk

Consultants were initially paired up with Partners by the King's Fund and the support was delivered by the Consultants in the form of up to five one-to-one sessions over a six-to-nine-month period. The model was designed to help leaders to dig deep, reflect on their practice and find their own solutions. In the early stages of the programme, Consultants offered their services pro-bono, while in later iterations, they received a payment of £200 per session paid to their organisations.

Over the course of the programme (and its various iterations), nearly 200 sector leaders participated - in itself a significant achievement and one that reflects the need and emphasises the demand for the approach taken by the programme.

The programme, however, could only meet the needs of a very small percentage of the sector in terms of numbers of those able to engage (for the first recruitment phase, for example, The King's fund received nearly 300 applications for 20 places). The premise, therefore, was that the learning (from both Consultants and Partners) would be cascaded across to their respective organisations and thus help inform the sector as a whole.

Throughout the programme participants played an important role in helping to shape, review and develop the programme through a Project Steering Group. Along with The King's Fund, the original partners were Comic Relief, GSK and the National Lottery Community Fund (*as was*).

Distinctiveness of the 'offer'

There are a number of leadership programmes on offer to senior leaders within the voluntary sector. What made Cascading Leadership distinctive was the model and the approach taken. Key elements included:

- High quality of training and supervision for consultants
- Peer-to-peer and sector-to-sector support
- Support to individuals in the context of their organisation
- Space and time to reflect
- Drawing upon existing sector assets
- Help to build relationships and collaboration
- Focus on leadership rather than skills development
- Credibility of The King's Fund and the various funders.

Key outcomes

The benefits relayed by both Partners and Consultants highlight the belief that the programme greatly benefited the individuals *and* their organisations in a number of significant ways²:

- An increase in confidence and motivation
- The ability to tackle challenging issues more effectively
- Greater levels of strategic thinking and decision-making
- Reduced isolation
- Strengthened organisations
- Better relationships with their Chair/Trustees.

² These were self-reported benefits, drawn from interviews and surveys with both Partners and Consultants.

Why it worked – 7 key elements

1. The Approach

The programme was designed to provide a space where Partners would be encouraged to self-reflect and thus form their own conclusions - essentially a coaching approach and one based on the Tavistock model³. This was made clear through the recruitment process and training and was then reinforced: initially through a convening at The King's Fund and, post-Covid, by the Consultants in their first session with Partners.

Partners would also be looking to 'learn' from their Consultants, as the latter had greater expertise and experience of the sector and a corresponding understanding of the challenges Partners faced. Therefore, a degree of skill sharing was also valued.

While the model remained the same throughout the various iterations of the programme, in practical terms this meant the approach to a varying extent included a 'mentoring' element and both Consultants and Partners felt comfortable with this 'blended' approach where appropriate.

'Some of it was coaching, some of it reflective listening, some of it action learning - lots of open questions. Come up with your own solutions - that came across very strongly.' (Partner)

2. Training

The quality of training offered by The King's Fund to Consultants was an integral and critical aspect of Cascading Leadership.

The training was specifically designed to support them in developing the skills they needed to support other voluntary sector leaders. A key focus of the training was on supporting Consultants to work with Partners to find their own solutions, rather than offering practical advice.

Consultants made clear that the training they received (led by highly experienced facilitators from The King's Fund) - and the opportunities they had to put this into practice - meant they significantly developed their own approach to leadership so that both they and the Partners - and their organisations - profited hugely. It also meant the support given by the Consultants was consistent.

'The success of the {programme} is largely due to the exceptional training provided.' (Consultant)

3. Supervision

On-going supervision was offered to the Consultants. This was provided by the same King's Fund facilitators as the training. Participants were expected to attend, and the supervision took place on a one-to-one basis over the 'phone. Later on in the programme, a group supervision model was adopted to reduce costs; this did not appear to have a negative impact on the quality of the supervision. Many consultants reported they liked hearing about others' experiences.

³ www.tavainstitute.org

This supervision - and the safe space it offered - was an essential part of the learning process and was greatly valued by the Consultants, who felt they were challenged and grew as a result. Partners, in turn, felt their aspirations for participation were met and key aspects of their leadership were strengthened.

'The supervision was probably the most important [aspect] - and struck the right balance between questions and offering interpretation and expertise. It really helped me to understand what I encountered in a new way.' (Consultant)

4. Peer-to-peer & sector-to-sector support

Having the support offered by a senior leader from within the voluntary sector was seen as crucial. Partners also appreciated the wider perspective that someone from a different organisation brings. They felt that working with expert Consultants from the sector meant there was a common understanding of the broad issues they faced, and an appreciation of how challenging the circumstances can be.

It also made sense to develop capacity within the sector and, where possible, keep resources within it. In addition, working with a peer from within the sector means their knowledge is current and applicable.

Appropriate 'matching' of Partners to Consultants was taken into consideration and aimed to incorporate:

- *Comparable background* - Partners wanted someone they could relate to, but who was further along their journey
- *Similar approach* - the size and type of organisation
- *'Gut feeling'* - most Partners wanted to feel a personal connection.
- *Geography* - pre-Covid, relative proximity was also considered.

(NB: In the latest iteration of the programme Partners chose their consultants - see below).

'It means you can build an honest relationship. It's equal, not a hierarchy - it's refreshing to be honest; you're not embarrassed.' (Partner)

5. Reflection

Without exception, both Partners and Consultants greatly appreciated and valued the time and space the programme offered for self-reflection and strategic thinking - something rarely afforded to them in their senior leader roles.

'I was looking for thinking space outside of our organisation to give me an opportunity to work through a variety of different aspects of my role, including strategic thinking.' (Partner)

6. Organisational benefit

Both Partners & Consultants felt that the programme had benefited their organisations as a whole and provided an opportunity to address specific issues and take difficult decisions.

Consultants felt it was a chance to develop their organisations, through increased networking and access to training. They also pointed to the fact they had developed stronger listening and reflection skills as a result, which also benefited the people they worked with.

As the programme offered individual support in the context of their organisations, participants were able therefore to embed the learning within their place of work.

Partners also saw the opportunity to participate in Cascading Leadership as a means of developing their organisation's capacity to progress and develop.

'I feel that my personal development has been the greatest benefit of Cascading Leadership. It has made me a stronger leader and that, in turn, benefits the organisation.' (Partner)

7. Alumni

A number of Partners took part in later iterations as Consultants and the involvement of alumni was seen as critical in helping to build learning and leadership in the sector and in adding significantly to the benefit programme participants received from taking part.

'It is absolutely important getting the alumni to engage.' (King's Fund)

5 considerations & challenges

1. Terms & definitions

Elements of the terms deployed by the programme and The King's Fund proved challenging throughout Cascading Leadership and were never fully resolved - although this had little impact on the value of the programme as a whole. These challenges manifested themselves in a number of ways:

'Peer-to-peer'

The programme was described as peer-to-peer, and this was true to the extent that both Consultants and Partners were almost all CEOs/Directors or equivalent. However, the Consultants were generally experienced leaders of larger organisations - this being a significant factor Partners valued about the programme. Whilst both parties reported significantly benefiting from their interaction, it was not a 'partnership of equals.'

'Consultants & Partners'

Both terms have particular connotations; for example, Consultants are usually seen as experts offering expert advice and - as described above - Partnership tends to imply an equivalent status.

In the early stages of the programme Partners were described as 'Clients', but this suggested that the exchange had been on a more transactional basis and was not peer-to-peer.

While both Consultants and Partners were largely comfortable with the Consultant/Partner terminology, the term 'Consultant' may have accounted for some initial confusion for partners about the nature of the support on offer.

‘Coaching’

Although aspects of the model included an approach akin to coaching, there was no accreditation attached to the course, and the Consultants were not qualified coaches.

2. Resourcing

The programme was initially very resource intensive when it was developed and run pre-Covid as the assumption was that all elements (including expenses) would require and benefit from a face-to-face approach. In addition, the recruitment to - and marketing of - the programme was both costly and time-consuming - especially as The King’s Fund wished to widen the net of potential applicants beyond those already signed up to its newsletter.

Cascading Leadership, therefore, required significant staff capacity including a dedicated project manager and strategic over-sight from a senior manager from The King’s Fund.

3. Matching

Initially matching of Consultants and Partners was managed by The King’s Fund and was based on a number of factors, including relative similarity of their organisations and geography.

Later on in the programme, The King’s Fund developed a method by which Partners could select a Consultant of their choice, based on a brief ‘biog’; although they did not always get their ‘first choice’, they all were happy with the consultant they secured.

This approach meant it was less resource intensive for The King’s Fund as the Consultants (and their organisations) took on most - but not all - of the logistical aspects of the programme.

4. Recruitment

Resourcing

As mentioned in **2.** above, Recruitment to the programme was very expensive. In order to attract as wide a range of applicants as possible (including those with no prior connection to The King’s Fund), significant effort was put into marketing the programme to as many potential Partners and Consultants as possible including through umbrella organisations.

The volume of applicants and the laudable commitment to a transparent and thorough selection process meant, however, that it was extremely demanding in terms of money and time. It only proved possible through the commitment of the staff and the generosity of the funders.

It is worth noting that The King’s Fund reputation and profile was seen an important aspect of Cascading Leadership’s ability to attract and recruit participants by many who applied.

Diversity

The make-up of the programme cohorts largely reflected the approximate 2/3 female to male ratio of the voluntary and community sector as a whole. While there were participants who identified as disabled or from LGBT+ communities - and representation from the four nations - it proved more difficult still to achieve diversity in ethnicity and age. Part of this was the challenge (*widely experienced in recruiting for leadership programmes*) of attracting people who may not see themselves as leaders.

In addition, smaller organisations may not have heard of The King’s Fund or thought it unapproachable.

In the latter stage of the programme, however, targeted recruitment with the support of previous participants from Black and Minoritised communities resulted in some increase in take up from those with ‘BAME’ backgrounds - particularly Consultants.

‘We shifted from perceiving participants being ‘hard to reach’ to recognising how the way we communicate and market [the programme] may make us hard to reach.’ (King’s Fund)

5. Face-to-face

The initial premise was that the programme would need to incorporate a face-to-face approach, both in terms of training and delivery. Covid-19 showed that this was not critical, though the introductory day for all Partners at The King’s Fund did help clarify and manage expectations about the programme. In later online iterations, without this preparation day, some Partners Consultants required a fair amount of time to fully explain to Partners what was on offer.

Moving the programme on-line, however, brought about significant cost and time savings - and for many meant greater accessibility. It also did not preclude a sense of cohort amongst the Partners

A limited hybrid model whereby Consultants and Partners get together at least once would, however, be worth considering and - if funds available - add value to the experience by providing a space away from the demands of their organisations.

7 key strategic questions arising from this paper

For any organisation considering offering a programme of this nature in the future, some key design questions to inform discussion may be useful:

1. How might it be resourced in terms of cost and personnel? Should it be paid for by ‘Partner’ organisations, by the convening organisation or by funders? Should it be free at point of delivery?
2. What is the right balance between face-to-face/online elements?
3. Without the profile or brand of an organisation such as The King’s Fund, would the credibility of the programme benefit from offering formal accreditation for both Consultants and Partners?
4. Should the matching process be self-selecting or involve active matching by the ‘host’ organisation?
5. How can one ensure the trainers and facilitators possess the required expertise and experience?
6. What more could be done to increase participant representation from leaders outside of the ‘usual suspects’?
7. To what an extent is there an aspiration to build a sense of cohort and engage alumni?

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For more information about the Cascading Leadership programme please contact leadership@kingsfund.org.uk