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# LEADERS OR LEADERSHIP

– THE CENTURY OF THE SYSTEM

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The inaugural lecture of the Further Education Trust for Leadership.  
Given at King's Place, London, 10th March 2015.

**JIM KRANTZ**

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# ABOUT FETL

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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.
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# JIM KRANTZ

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*Jim Krantz is a leading voice in the areas of organisational change, leadership and the design of work for high performance. He has written widely on organisational performance, the impact of emerging trends on the challenges of management, and issues of leadership in contemporary organisations. In 1988 he founded WorkLab, a consultancy which specialises in using management and behavioural science to help organisations in the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors translate strategy into action, align strategy with goals, and create methods that accelerate development and learning. Before becoming managing principal of WorkLab, Krantz was a senior consultant at the Wharton School centre for applied research, in the University of Pennsylvania, and action research fellow at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, in London.*

# INTRODUCTION

DAME RUTH SILVER

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**Just as we can't do much with bare hands, we can't think much with bare brains. At FETL we aim to stimulate and feed thinking in and by our sector, and to explore new dimensions of ourselves in roles and in tasks in order to be best prepared for what's ahead, to offer strong contribution to its success.**

Part of this mission is to bring ideas in from elsewhere, to enable new insights on our world and the state we're in; most of all to work with these amongst ourselves so we become stronger, more confident of our place in the world, and better able to advocate for the education and training opportunities we collectively deliver.

I have heard Jim Krantz speak on many occasions, and I have never failed to go away feeling that he has added much to the way I see the world. Jim's collaborative model of consultation and inclusive style of delivery has much resonance for our sector. His thinking on organisational life has greatly enriched many. His is a compelling hypothesis: that to understand the unique characteristic of each organisation, you need first to understand the underlying systemic factors that it operates in.

This is not mere theorising; it is based on almost three decades of supporting organisations in public and private sectors to become the best that they can and he is successful in that.

Jim Krantz's practice is shaped by four principles:

- Organisations are shaped jointly by social and technical forces
- They exist in increasingly dynamic and unstable environments
- Clarity of objective and task, provide the basis for high performance
- Adapting to emerging conditions requires people in organisations to learn from experience.

These principles are explained further in this published version of our inaugural FETL Lecture in 2015. It has much to offer by way of 'food for thought' and it is offered in this spirit by the Trustees of FETL.

*Dame Ruth Silver is the founding President of FETL. She served as Principal of Lewisham College for 17 years until 2009 and became chair of the Learning and Skills Improvement Service in 2010. She is co-chair of the Skills Commission.*

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**I have a very close friend who years ago was Dean of Westminster. When I told him about this invitation he said “why in the world did they invite you?” A very good question. Nothing really came to mind.**

Why would I, an American, be standing here, someone neither steeped in the further education or skills tradition nor a professional educator, at such an important moment in the Trust’s history?

Maybe the missing answer opens an interesting space for curiosity.

I have to assume that inviting me to be here has something to do with what FETL is trying to embody in its effort to make a difference. With someone who doesn’t fit the expected categories or the traditional disciplines, I wonder if it reflects an aspiration for spanning disciplines, cross-pollination and possibly most important, risking the unfamiliar as a learning resource.

If so, I hope I’ll do justice to that aspiration.

Tonight I want to focus on two social forces that are on a collision course. In some places they’ve already collided, and in the resulting sparks I believe we can already see bits of the future.

One is the changing nature of organisations in our information-based, globalised, networked world. The other is the further education and skills sector itself. The point of intersection has to do with what kind of organisations will enable FE institutions to take advantage of the opportunities before it. And, in particular, what this intersection means for how we think about leading these institutions.

Before starting though, I need to ask your forbearance on one thing. Although Dame Ruth Silver and Mark Ravenhall have resolutely tried to bring me up to speed on the sector, I am speaking mostly from the perspective of American Community College system which, as I am sure many of you know, confront very similar challenges. Though the context differs, I assume there is enough resonance.

# The Leadership Trajectory

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**Notions of leadership organise a great deal of our thinking in today's world. What we see in and need from our leaders symbolises our ideas of belonging, moral behaviour, practical necessity, and the meaning of community.**

Leadership plays a vital role in how we confront the future. It is widely believed that the quality of our lives depends on the quality of our leadership. We yearn for leaders to articulate and sustain a compelling image of the future and promise us a safe tomorrow.

Leadership is now seen by many as the single most important issue facing modern institutions. More pressing than developing management skills, strategic planning, change management, or diversity awareness.

Leaders are supposed to supply the vision and inspire commitment. While success may depend on new technologies, global thinking, continuous improvement and superior service, our leaders are meant to make it all happen.

A vast industry has grown for finding, training, developing, supporting, and fixing leaders. Countless graduate programmes and undergraduate courses focus on leadership. Business schools centre their missions on turning out leaders. And an endless array of seminars, conferences, speeches and books are offered by leadership experts.

Though such a looming and important issue, trying to say something useful about leadership is very tricky. Although inherently collective, leadership is deeply personal. Our feelings about it are, often unbeknownst to us, richly coloured by early life experience. It's one of those slippery terms that comes to mean everything and nothing, with countless connotations, and people talking past one another. Often we're left with little more than clichés, bromides, and empty platitudes.



While writing this lecture, a story came to mind about the banquet of a distinguished society. Two giants in the field, mortal enemies, gave opening remarks. The first distinguished speaker gives a perfectly constructed, beautifully reasoned, exquisitely formulated statement. His arch enemy comes to the podium: "I too have nothing to say." I find myself whipsawed between both sentiments – knowing something after 40 years working in the field, but also feeling as though I have nothing new or useful to say.

One of the giants in my own field, Warren Bennis, who recently passed away, echoed this sentiment when he described leadership as the most studied and least understood of all topics. The last 75 years have seen a massive effort to identify the essential elements of leadership. Tens of thousands of studies have been conducted and an endless amount of data has been collected. In spite of this, a commonly accepted, empirically verified, understanding of leadership eludes us. Nor do we have any real understanding of what distinguishes leaders from non-leaders. The field is a quagmire of competing concepts and theories.

Against this background, I remembered something else Dean Carr told me. That in Merrie England, a person about to be beheaded would forgive the executioner in hopes that the act would be carried out swiftly and painlessly. So before I embark on my own elaboration of leadership, I feel moved to forgive you as well as thank you for this opportunity to offer my thoughts about leadership.

## How are organisations developing?

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**The first of the two trajectories on the collision course has to do with the direction in which organisations are developing.**

Leadership scholars started by trying to isolate those particular traits that distinguish leaders. Many assumed these traits were inherent. That leaders are born, not made. Others thought that since people change, leaders can be developed, if we only knew those essential

qualities. However, it turns out that no personality traits have been found that reliably predict who will either become a leader or be an effective one.

If not traits, then what? Maybe behaviour is the answer. How do leaders behave? What leadership behaviours or styles promote effectiveness? Again, in spite of vast efforts, this too has led to a dead-end, piled high with competing theories.

Since neither traits nor behaviours did the trick, maybe thought processes would reveal the secrets -- the intentions, perceptions, sensing, subjectivity, adaptive learning, mindfulness, which underlie today's most popular ideas. But here too, a cacophony of competing ideas.

## Context matters

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**Of course, context really matters, and naturally frustrates any search for timeless qualities. The wider social, economic, technological context is the stage on which the drama of leadership plays out.**

In earlier, more stable times, leaders led by providing good solid management -- define purposes, embody them in programmes, handle conflict and defend institutional boundaries. Then, the greater complexity, global interconnectedness and environmental turbulence that is often referred to as post-industrialism, led to a new outlook -- that management and leadership are different. Managers do *things* right; leaders do the right things (Kotter, 1996).

Planning, budgeting, organising, staffing, and problem-solving is what managers do. They provide order. Leadership, on the other hand, is about change. It requires vision. Defining the future, aligning the people and resources with that future and then motivating them to create it. Leaders bring about change -- they are transformational.

Those who transform their organisations become public heroes and role models against which others are judged. The overriding premise that cuts across all of these theories and models is that leadership exists inside of that sack of skin we call the person.

Leadership is exercised by individuals who influence others based on some combination of position and personal qualities. And the leader holds the key to performance.

## My Proposition

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**This evening I want to propose that this way of thinking about leadership may no longer serve us very well. I'm not so sure it ever did, but I think it's decidedly so now as we try to build organisations that are suited the emerging 21st century landscape.**

Many believe, as do I, that the idea of the dynamic leader, looking over the horizon, discerning the correct direction and guiding the ship is becoming an outmoded myth. It can actually stand in the way of what is needed. An idea that can be used defensively for purposes safety rather than for confronting today's complex, confusing realities.

A darker view that, I believe also warrants consideration, is that the singular focus on the leader can become a kind of collective escape from responsibility. What I would like to consider with you is that we may be looking for leadership in the wrong place.

The old joke about the gentleman who comes home inebriated illustrates my point. Unlocking his door, he drops the keys, which are difficult to see in the dark. Across the way is a streetlight, so he decides to go over and look there because the light is better. I'm suggesting that the warm glowing streetlight across the way might well be the familiar idea that leadership is found within the individual. I want to suggest that we'll find other valuable keys under another streetlight, keys to understanding vitally important dimensions of leadership.

The alternative to the person is, of course, leadership as an aspect of the system. Leadership as a property of the system itself rather than something that simply emanates from talented individuals. Systems thinking is best condensed in the everyday phrase that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. It is these special qualities, created by the countless interactions, yet beyond the individuals, which hold, I believe, important keys to 21st century leadership.

## What I'm not saying

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**I am not suggesting that individuals are unimportant. People determine a great deal of what happens.**

However, they are deeply affected by the setting. What a person is capable of and what parts achieve expression depend on the conditions that inhibit or amplify certain attitudes, behaviours, and potentials.

Nor am I downplaying the importance of creative leaders in high position. I'd be the last person to suggest that, especially to this room. At the same time, leaders' roles are shifting and to succeed new sensibilities are becoming increasingly important.

## Systemic View

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**What I am suggesting is turning the usual equation on its head and considering leadership as an OUTCOME or OUTPUT of the system rather than as an INPUT or starting condition.**

We are highly attuned to how leaders, in high position, affect their organisations, but generally far less aware of how organisations shape their leaders.

The most vivid illustration, of course, is times of crisis, when a special context somehow conjures heroic inspirational leaders. In Churchill's words: "I was not the lion, but it fell to me to give the lion's roar." Or how, in the rubble of Ground Zero, Rudy Giuliani was transformed overnight from a mean-spirited, vindictive, small-minded, lame-duck mayor into a larger-than-life, compassionate, embracing, clear-minded leader who provided great clarity and strength for us. "Churchill in a baseball cap" one journalist called him. Since then, he's reverted to the same spiteful, mean-spirited, small-minded person we knew before.

How does this happen? What forces are at play?

This goes for more commonplace as well, in organisational contexts. I remember being so impressed, the study of several organisations that replaced their leaders in the belief that what they really needed was charismatic leadership. So they went out and found leaders known for their charisma. In most instances, however, they weren't charismatic in the new organisations. Charisma is context-sensitive, far more than we automatically believe.

I believe that we are entering a time in which the rewards will go to organisations that figure out how to foster leadership throughout, those that don't rely on god-like leaders at the top.

A systemic view of leadership is about what enables people to exercise leadership in their own roles, wherever they are in the pecking order.

## **Leaders require followers and vice versa.**

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**The idea of shared leadership has its own roots in the history of leadership studies. It can be traced to the realisation that leadership occurs only in the context of relationships. It was based on recognition that personality, authority, or power in themselves are insufficient for leadership – others have to come along, and not just compliantly.**

Elsewhere, I've written about the theme of leadership and betrayal in Henry IV (Krantz, 2006). In the same play (Henry IV, Pt. II.), Shakespeare makes a similar point when Glendower brags: "*I can call spirits from the vasty deep.*" Hotspur's snide response is: "*Why, so can I, or so can any man; But will they come when **you** do call them?*"

If leadership resides in relationships, followers and leaders are jointly producing it. Together. What bonds them is mutual purpose. Leadership becomes an artifact of the interaction. An aspect of that whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

From this vantage point, the language of leader and follower seems a bit quaint. It also confronts us with their profound dependence on one another. (Hirschhorn, 1988). Leaders need followers and followers need leaders to produce leadership.

With overwhelming complexity, breathtaking rates of change, and so many boundaries in liquid flux, the idea of distributed leadership and its underlying concepts have become what Don Schon (1971) calls an "idea in good currency," a term referring to the life cycle of ideas. They reach acceptance and stimulate change when they express underlying realities.

## Ideas in good currency

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**The second main trajectory on this crash course has to do with FE itself.**

I think that FE and skills training are also becoming "ideas in good currency." I realise this might seem implausible or even laughable in the current climate or in face of the recently announced budget cuts in adults skills here, but this is my proposition as a longer term, structural matter.

Regardless of all the wonderful work, UK FE institutions and our Community Colleges in the US have languished in the public mind, in a kind of ambiguous intermediate state between two clearly

defined and highly valued institutions - universally embraced primary education and the iconic status of 4-year colleges and universities, what Sir Andrew Foster described as the “neglected middle child.”

The ambivalence about these institutions is undoubtedly grounded in many sources, including that they tend to be repositories of uncomfortable feelings. Feelings about the inadequacy of our schools systems. Feelings about underachievers, linked with aspirations for and disappointment with sons and daughters. Feelings about those in need of a second chance, about poverty, and complex feelings about our immigrant populations.

Now, however, a new aura of hope is in the air. The US Community College is becoming “an idea in good currency” because our policy makers see the role they play in the vitality of our society and in our economic well-being.

The best evidence is President Obama’s recent proposal for the first two years of Community College to be made available for free. Listen carefully to how he frames it:

“Now is the time to build a firmer, stronger foundation for growth that will not only withstand future economic storms, but one that helps us thrive and compete in a global economy. It’s time to reform our community colleges so that they provide Americans of all ages a chance to learn the skills and knowledge necessary to compete for the jobs of the future.”

The sector is coming into focus as a hinge of adaptation.

Another sign of “good currency” is that Community Colleges are becoming “hard wired,” so to speak, into the larger educational system. High schools are developing joint programmes with community colleges to accelerate some students’ learning.

Similar integration is happening at the other end. One of my clients, a well-regarded 4 year liberal arts college, is crafting formal linkages with nearby Community Colleges so that their successful students receive automatic acceptance. They're coordinating course offerings and requirements to support smooth transitions. As you can imagine, it is a complex undertaking that involves several accreditation bodies, drawing on the knowledge of dozens of people.

Now these community college students will have a chance to get a degree at almost half the cost of attending the university for 4 years. At £25,000 a year it makes a huge difference.

Other parts of a new educational eco-systems are being forged through relationships with local companies, which depend on an educated workforce. Large global corporations are in on it too, joining with community colleges throughout the US to train students on technology-based jobs.

Why all of this now? I see two main reasons, both alluded to in President Obama's comments. One is the looming issue of income inequality and poverty. The other is about the changing nature of employment. I'll touch briefly on both.

## Poverty and income disparity

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**Income inequality, wage stagnation, and the relative decline in middle class prosperity is now a preoccupation in Washington, on both sides of the aisle.**

Of course the right and left have different explanations. Nevertheless, the statistics are sobering, frightening really, and Community Colleges have been shown to be the most effective anti-poverty programme in existence.



## The economic imperative

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**The second driver for the "good currency" has to do with the economic transformation underway. The reasons behind it are well known—globalisation, technological change, immigration patterns, the rise of knowledge work, a decrease in workers' bargaining power. Entire segments of workers become obsolete overnight because of information technology.**

Jobs requiring the basic Community College degree, are growing three times faster than those requiring no college experience and that the gradient is increasing. And, of course, what we think of as conventional jobs are becoming much more knowledge-intensive.

In this context, the education, skilling and re-skilling of workers, plays a central role in economic strength. It becomes a strategic matter.

All of this points to the idea that this is a time of great opportunity for the sector. And yet, the challenges are equally enormous, for both policy makers who see this opportunity and for leaders of the institutions, preparing students to be productive citizens in the emerging economy.

Tonight's topic has to do with whether and how these opportunities will be taken advantage of.

Aligning our organisations with the needs and opportunities on the horizon, rather than those in the sunset becomes a central challenge.

This is where the two forces meet – the changing nature of organisations and the movement of FE to a more central role. I am suggesting that the kinds of institutions that will thrive at this intersection will think differently about leadership.

## Leadership as a Systemic Process

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**New ways of connecting the parts so that new ideas and new solutions emerge requires widespread participation. The future is emerging around new ways of combining organisations, communities, local governments, and non-profits that form inter-organisational domains.**

It involves building linkages between disciplines, between institutions and their stakeholders, and their communities. These are the eco-systems we hear so much about today. Where local institutions figure out how to be agents of each other's success.

Institutions will thrive by finding ways to stimulate active engagement at all levels. Not junior copies of those on top, but people, in relation to their tasks, and the authority that goes along with their roles, functioning in an environment that supports coming up with good ideas, a willingness to join with and improve new ways of doing things, and helping others around them to engage with passion.

Even simple decisions aren't simple any more. Now they involve multiple interests and numerous stakeholders. People work within multifaceted, loosely organised environments. Authority is diffused, resources dispersed, stakeholders diverse, and goals ambiguous, vague, or conflicting. Leaders need to be adept at fostering systems that produce the capacity of people to take thoughtful decisions and take meaningful action in the midst of such uncertainty.

## Practical Implications for Leadership

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**Of course it is easier to advocate creative problem solving, new ways of combining resources, different leadership sensibilities and activating leadership at all levels, than to say what it means on a more practical level.**

At the risk of adding more clichés and platitudes to the swelling mound, I'd like to offer some ideas about the implications of these changes.

Here are three dimensions that, in my mind, foster the leadership-rich behaviour needed for the networked eco-systems of today and tomorrow. I call them: **enrolment**, **conversation**, and **containment**.

## Enrolment

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**We empower our students to be productive citizens by giving them the skills and knowledge to succeed. To break out of their circumstances. The same idea is often used to describe what is needed in organisations – to be entrepreneurial or proactive, employees need to be empowered.**

I'd like to propose a related, though in some ways opposite frame. Empowering suggests freeing people from constraints and structures. Rather, I believe that we need to help people join more deeply by occupying their roles more fully and vitally. Instead of empowering people we need to *enrol* them.

By role I refer not to a position, but to the part of the larger task that people carry forward. Enabling people to discover or create meaning in their part of the overall effort. The shared task is the foundation on which leadership is built. Shared purpose is what binds people together. And enrolling, being fully in role, is the way systemic leadership comes into being.

Without shared purpose or task, leaders and followers can't find each other in a deeply connected way. Without it community become hollow and ritualistic. Leaders and followers carry out disconnected work. The result is obedience, compliance, passionless engagement, and depressed people in high position, not leadership.

Supporting people to make connections between their roles and the overall purposes and mission amounts to bringing “roles to life.” Aligning roles with the larger purposes involves tapping into the “institution in the mind”, as David Armstrong (2007) has so richly helped us understand. The link with the broader world is vitally important to the sense of community and citizenship. And, of course, as the great poet Neruda reminds us: “Be careful how you see the world, it is that way you know.”

So, what is my role? Do I carry a block of stone all day or am I building the cathedral; do I turn a bolt with a spanner or am I protecting my community by producing jet fighters? To make institutional purpose personal. It involves the kind of discourse that Eric Trist (1983) referred to as re-appreciating, or reframing, challenging situations.

Engagement of students is one of the key challenges in Community College student success. It may go without saying that enrolling teachers more fully will support the enrolment of students as well and help them see beyond what is often experienced as the lugging and bolt turning of being in school.

## Conversation

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**Shared leadership requires conversation. Finding those connections between the personal and the institutional, and reframing purposes in ways that stimulate connection requires conversation.**

It relies on environments in which people are learning from their own experience, from each other, from customers, students and partners. Learning happens through conversation and it emerges through relationships. Authentic, integrated, meaningful conversation turns out to be a crucial asset.

Conversation is equally fundamental to creating and leading in the eco-systems that our entities are now resembling. Knitting together different groups and institutions involves getting groups and individuals with different definitions of the problem, to incorporate one another's perspectives. And it requires an ability to face contradictions.

The water plant engineer whose job now requires a higher certification talking with his neighbour who works at Consolidated Electric, whose wife works at a local community college. The conversation leads to a new arrangement between the institutions.

Or the administrators of my client, a college, seeing new trends through their contacts with community organisations and understanding how they can be opportunities.

Or whatever conversations brought about a fascinating project here, where the learning process has been reorganised so that chemistry students work with hairdressing students and local businesses to develop new products.

Which, by the way, is one way I appreciate the wisdom of FETL's mission. Its aim is to strengthen the leadership of thinking in further education. Not thinking about leadership but the leadership of thinking. A subtle, but crucial difference, which suggests that the need is not to have new orthodoxies and formulas but new forms of conversation and engagement. To give thinking a greater role in leadership and to support leadership as a reflective practice.

## Containment

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**Anxieties connected with change pose a constant threat to our ability to adapt, discern futures, and join with new ways of working. A key leadership function is the containment of these anxieties so they don't erode the capacity for creative thought and action.**

We live in a time when our organisations are deeply vulnerable to existential anxieties, with primitive emotional dynamics an all too familiar by-product, such a flight into inter-personal conflict and resistant dependency.

The loss of dependable boundaries is often fought against by adhering in-the-mind to hierarchical models of organisations and their environments, aggravating the difficulties of working in the horizontal, cross-functional, fragmented social-ecologies around us (Armstrong 2007).

This is compounded by the anxieties already built into the educational enterprises, and in a particular way with the US Community College population, because it deals not only with intellectual growth but human development.

Conventional means of containing disruptive emotional dynamics, from the industrial era are no longer viable. They relied on stable boundaries and small group formations.

New forms of containment are needed in order to support authentic conversation, group innovation and fostering ordinary human discourse (Trist 1977, 1983).

What Winnicott (1965) describes as a "holding environment," one that provides a space for processing experience, is vital under our emerging conditions. It also requires leaders who possess the emotional capacity to tolerate uncertainty, frustration, and pain without getting too anxious themselves.

## Conclusion

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**It is easy to be enthralled by heady new ideas of leadership, systemic transformation and new forms of community coming together around meaningful purposes. At the same time we need to be mindful of the potential damage caused by what we call “pie-in-the-sky” thinking. As one of my mentors, Isabel Menzies-Lyth (1979), pointed out, unrealistic or excessively idealistic missions lead to anti-task cultures.**

The policy makers and politicians that comprise the authorising environments will play such an instrumental role in what is possible. As discussed, I believe there are many reasons for optimism that FE is becoming an “idea in good currency.” At the same time, there is no shortage of reasons for discouragement.

Navigating between despair and demoralisation, on one hand, and grandiose, unrealistic hopes, on the other is, to be sure, an important part of leadership for all involved.

I come away from this wonderful opportunity to explore these issues by thinking that there are many forces supporting the possibility of creative development in the sector, its institutions, and its students. Especially if we can find ways for people throughout the enterprise to fully occupy their roles and find the overlap between their own passions and the higher purposes of further education and skills institutions.

**Thank you very much.**

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