



P R O V O C A T I O N S

SHAME, LEARNING AND REPAIR: FOSTERING COMPASSION IN ORGANISATIONAL LIFE

A FETL provocation by Dame Ruth Silver

The meaning of the term 'provocation' is usually understood as 'incitement', something that provokes, arouses or stimulates – a message in search of a response. This series of short FETL papers has this in mind. Their aim is to stimulate interest and debate, to air a new or original idea with a view to eliciting thoughtful, open-minded responses. As with all FETL publications, we do not seek to offer the final word. We are all about what happens beyond the page, in the wider life of an idea. We hope readers will take them in this spirit and share with us their own ideas and responses and, indeed, their own provocations.

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There has been much critical scrutiny of leadership in further education of late. A good deal of this is justified, and nobody in the sector should have any problem with high standards of conduct or rigorous accountability. It is part and parcel of leadership, part and parcel of organisational life, particularly where large amounts of public money are being spent.

What troubles me, and I think here I am voicing a concern widely felt within the further education sector, is that very often the criticism levelled at leaders is harsh and intemperate, the judgements passed by those charged with holding us to account poorly informed and without context, and the general tone of discourse around institutional failure unflinchingly personal and sometimes abusive.

Not only is this not conducive to smart, open and learning-focused leadership, it creates an environment in which leaders can become secretive, myopic and introverted, unwilling to display vulnerability or to ask for support when they need it. This, to put it mildly, is not what the sector needs.

The Further Education Trust for Leadership has been involved in a number of projects that touch on the relationship between shame and leadership and the impact of shame on organisational culture. I am increasingly convinced that this is a subject about which we, as a sector, need to talk. Shame is no small issue and I want to take a moment to explain why I attach such significance to it.

Shame is often confused with guilt but it is important that we distinguish between the two. Guilt is a feeling we have about something we have done. It concerns our actions and behaviour, particularly where there is a gap between these and our own individual

standards. Shame, on the other hand, is much more fundamentally about the self. It concerns who and what we are and, as such, its roots go deeper into the psyche, with longer-lasting, potentially more debilitating effects. While guilt has to do with what we expect of ourselves, shame is about the judgement of others, of the world, and our own perceived failure to measure up to it.

Shame can prevent people from seeking help when they need it, stop them taking risks or trying something new, and stifle their potential. We have all in our work encountered people who have had to deal with feelings of shame in the workplace, and we have all, I imagine, worked with leaders who shame others, and treat shame as a legitimate part of their leadership strategy. Many will also have worked in places where unwritten codes and mechanisms of exclusion are used to shame people deemed not to fit in out of elite jobs and keep the best opportunities for the already-privileged. This is not only unnecessary, it is unethical and it is bad for business. Shame does not improve performance. It does not prompt people to reevaluate and develop strategies to solve problems. It wounds people, makes them shut down and erodes trust in the workplace.

Shame is a fact of life, for individuals and organisations. It is essential that all organisations develop open and inclusive work cultures, and strategies and networks of support, to help them deal with it. So, why is it an issue of particular concern to further education? My concern about FE is that we operate in an environment of high-stakes learning and high-stakes accountability, where judgement is quick and frequently unforgiving, and the pressure of the government's changing expectations incessant. There are questions to be asked too about the qualifications and related experience of those who hold us to account, and their understanding of the complex environment in which we, as FE leaders, operate. Far too often, the focus on regulators appears to be punitive rather than on what needs to be in place to help people and organisations succeed and progress.

This challenge of leading in this complex, demanding sector is compounded by the growing need for the joint leadership of interdependency. Colleges, in particular, are much more than providers of education and training. They occupy pivotal places in their communities and are at the centre of a network of interests and needs that makes them both indispensable to their communities and crucial to the successful interaction of staff, employers and learners, and local and national politics, in the service of learning,

economic success and social inclusion. This means that colleges and other providers are frequently operating in a partially unknown environment without clear standards.

Leadership in such a demanding, high-stakes environment can be stressful and isolating, particularly when the expectations of those who hold you to account are poorly grounded or unrealistic. It is made more difficult when leaders struggling in such an environment witness the high personal price leaders pay for errors and failure. Shamed people can become introverted; driven not by their own values and the wider purposes of the work, but by a toxic and debilitating fear of failure.

When leaders experience shame as a result of the gap between their own performance and the expectations of those who sit in judgement over them and the sector, it can create a vicious circle. Leaders become reluctant to take bold, creative decisions; they become averse to risk. They stop sharing with their core team and become defensive and autocratic. Instead, they focus too narrowly on the demands of politicians and can forget the mission of the sector and their institution, which is, quite simply, to lead learning. Often, they can pass their anxieties onto staff, pressing too hard for them to deliver unrealistic results, and thus creating an organisational culture of shame, in which the sense of failing to meet one's own personal standards and the values of one's organisation or profession becomes widespread.

How do we break this cycle, or, better still, prevent it happening at all? The first step is to talk about this, which is, in part, why I am writing this 'provocation', to begin a dialogue about the impact our punitive system of accountability is having, on its leaders, in particular, and the toll this is taking on recruitment and retention. A culture where it is possible to acknowledge vulnerability, to talk openly about failure, rather than sinking deeper into defensive mindsets, and to learn, is much needed. It is in then that the process of repair can start, where we can find a different, more positive way of framing events, and begin to develop creative, collaborative ways forward. We badly need to create inclusive cultures, both within the workplace, and more widely within the sector, at every level, where judgement is tempered with understanding and compassion.

Second, we need to create networks of support for leaders. Of course, governance has a role to play in this. Boards of governors should be able to support leaders and find ways of nurturing success in their institution. But it is important too that there is distance in this relationship and it is obvious that leaders will not always feel comfortable in sharing

their concerns and vulnerabilities with those responsible for oversight of their role, and, ultimately, their hiring and firing. More crucial, I feel, is that leaders are able to access networks through which they can talk to similar colleagues, and share their concerns and challenges in a safe, non-judgemental environment. Without some form of peer support, it can be difficult for leaders to identify the drivers of one's own behaviour and the impact these are having on one's organisation.

Third, it is important that people have ways of calling out legitimate misconduct when it happens, without huge negative consequences for their work. The challenges cited above, combined with the impact redundancy, restructuring and sharing service can have on staff morale and the relationships between staff and the senior leadership team, make further education ripe territory for whistleblowing. People should not be forced to endure a situation where they feel their professional values are being compromised and what Professor Mark Stein, in the 2018 FETL Lecture, termed the 'good self' of an organisation is under threat. And organisations should not react to whistleblowing by turning their back on the whistleblower, 'othering' and stigmatising them. Whistleblowers play a critical role in protecting organisational values and require environments in which staff feel safe in reporting issues of misconduct. Shamed organisations need healing too.

Fourth, and finally, we need to change the way we talk about these things; reshape the public discourse. This is of course a wider issue. Public debate in the UK has polarised in recent years, with social media – a potential source of connection and conversation – in fact amplifying our differences and polluting the discourse with a decided nastiness and lack of empathy. This is difficult to change but surely it is essential to the health of our democracy that it does. I think we can all do something, by accepting the frailty not only of all human beings, but of our own judgement, and by seeking to understand before passing judgement. Where people's lives and livelihoods are at stake, we all have a responsibility to choose words carefully and not simply assume bad faith. It is beholden on leaders, in particular, to create common spaces in which authentic, inclusive debate can take place and prejudices be challenged in the spirit of creating a shared understanding of what we want and where we are going.

But, of course, it is not just about what the sector can do. I want to see government thinking harder about our current system accountability, and its impact on cultures of teaching and learning and on staff performance. Too often, the decisions of leaders and

teachers are being driven by a desire to tick the boxes that keep inspectors happy and this, inevitably, means a drift away from core values and the 'good self' of our institutions. This needs to change. Professional respect, collaboration and mutual support are the values that should guide our thinking about accountability.

Of course, poor leadership should be called out. Public service, it should not really need saying, is what we are about. As I mention above, whistleblowers have an important role here in highlighting when an organisation has drifted from its core purposes or failed to live up to its values. What I want to say is that we need to create 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. To get there, we need more humanity and helpful judgement.

It is not always easy, in the environment in which we work, to maintain a clear line of sight to learners. Yet, they are the ones who leave our institutions wearing our liveries and reputations, and, for that reason alone, fixing institutional problems is a cross-institutional, indeed a cross-system, concern, and we all, as Mark Stein has argued, have a responsibility for protecting the 'good self' of our organisation. Cultivating understanding, connection and empathy, across the ecosystem of organisations and across this sector, is now essential.

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

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The Further Education Trust for Leadership

Website: www.fetl.org.uk

Email: enquiries@fetl.org.uk

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