FE AND SKILLS
AND SHAME IN
ORGANISATIONAL LIFE

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

John Bazalgette

Working for the Grubb Institute, a research and organisational analysis consultancy, for over 50 years, John has been exploring the kind of organisational leadership and management that enrols the passions of men, women and children to serve the best purposes of the organisations that bring them together. John was a Governor of an inner city comprehensive school for over 30 years. The school was placed in special measures by Ofsted and supported by their governors moved over a number of years to being rated as outstanding in all aspects. Conceptually, he describes this as involving finding, making and taking authentic roles in systems. Currently, he is working with grandparents on how to find, make and take the roles in families that are now called for from them in today's fast-evolving society. His central interest is how values, beliefs, faith (and no faith), can be drawn upon as potent resources in working to purpose, from whatever position one takes within an organisational structure.

Susan Harrison

Susan has over 35 years' experience of working with individuals, groups and systems in the public and independent sectors. She has held senior operational, strategic, governance and regulatory roles in health, housing, social care and charitable organisations. Susan has trained extensively in management and organisational theory and practice. In 2010/11, she contributed to the design and facilitation of leadership and management programmes for the National Skills Academy for Adult Social Care, including the direction and programme management of a national management graduate trainee scheme. She is a lay research ethicist and contributes to the work of the Health Research Authority. She has a personal interest in living and working with disfigurement and visible difference. Currently, she offers her time and skills in governance roles and occasional project work, working with individuals and groups to reveal and deploy resources that sustain community purpose.

The authors are grateful to Julian Wood for his assistance.

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Dame Ruth Silver

Unsurprisingly, some resistance and even bemusement became apparent when I first suggested that shaming – and organizational shame, in particular – was a topic to which further education should give serious and sustained attention. Some colleagues were not convinced, either of the relevance of the topic to further education or of its place within the remit of the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL). I want to explain our case for both, beginning with the latter.

I often describe FETL's work in terms of two domains of interest, distinct yet inter-dependent: *the leader in the system* and *the system in the leader*. By the leader in the system, I mean the professional place of leaders and leadership in the wider educational and social ecology. When the work is about the system in the leader, the concern is with the person who is also a leader, the ways in which that ecology, that system, is internalised in that person's life and values, how it relates to their culture, beliefs, ideas, character and disposition – and how those things, in turn, relate to the system.

FETL, as an organisation, has a mission to promote leadership of thinking within the further education sector and system, and a responsibility to support leaders in reflecting on their own internal drivers and the deep impact the system, with its frequents changes, has on them. But it is not enough simply to acknowledge that the second domain matters. We must understand also that these two domains cannot be separated. We must look at both things together if we are to understand

fully how policies work and what interventions are likely to be successful. As the biologist and systems theorist Ludwig Von Bertalanffy reminds us, the outcome of any action depends as much on the state of the object acted upon as the action itself.

With leadership comes a deep – and, often, deeply felt – responsibility to scrutinize our human and moral drivers, our frailties as well as our strengths, and to learn from what we find. Dealing positively with critical scrutiny is a big part of leadership, particularly where leaders are both authorised and responsible for spending significant amounts of public money. In the exercise of these duties, leaders must be consciously capable of reacting constructively to questioning and criticism, where appropriate, and of learning from their mistakes. Indeed, and crucial to our role, leadership brings also the equal, serious duty to point out – with evidence – that frequently the systems they introduce are ill-fitted, often distorting and engendering unacceptable behaviours.

However, as the authors of this paper suggest, the level and nature of scrutiny in the further education sector has sometimes gone beyond what is fair or justified, helping create a culture of fear and anxiety in which honest but struggling leaders might be reluctant to admit vulnerability or to reach out for help.

In further education, the feeling of isolation leaders sometimes experience in reacting and coping with the rapidly changing agenda of the sector (and shielding staff from the worst impact of these anxiety-inducing shifts) is compounded by a high-stakes system of accountability, a climate of near-constant policy turbulence and a decade of funding cuts. And when things do go wrong, the judgement upon sector leaders is often under-analysed, harsh and unforgiving, and sometimes personal and even abusive.

As FETL has argued elsewhere, this does not create an environment conducive to far-sighted, open, learning and collaborative styles of leadership. In many cases, it produces leadership that is introverted, authoritarian and focused on short-term goals in preference to the long-term needs of students and their communities.

This paper – and a further, complementary paper that will follow – aims to address these issues, and to put organisational shame on the FE agenda. It does not mean to give concrete solutions to these problems. Its purpose instead is to stimulate more discussion and to give that discussion a framework, grounded both in academic research and in the concerns of sector leaders. It is good to hear the voices of sector leaders raised in this context. This is not an easy topic and I would like to express my appreciation of those leaders who took part in the interviews and shared their own experience of shame and shaming.

The COVID-19 pandemic reminds us, among other things, of the importance of social and systems solidarity in 'leaderhood' and the shared nature of our responsibilities to our organisations, our society and our learners. When shaming goes public, its livery is worn by all in the system, and it is surprisingly long lasting in its fabric, nowhere more so and much to the disadvantage of learners.

It is also an attack on learning. We can do better.

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

INTRODUCTION

In December 2018 the sector was in deep shock at the news that a young and experienced sector principal had died by suicide. He had resigned in November 2018, following events where his competence and reputation had been called into question, including by those working within the sector and through the work of external regulators. His tragic death increased awareness within the sector of the potential personal and cultural impact of the sometimes harsh and uninformed criticism levelled at leaders in the further education sector in recent years.

In a paper addressing this concern, Dame Ruth Silver, President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL), highlighted 'the relationship between shame and leadership and the impact of shame on organisational culture'.[1] In this response, we seek to make a further contribution to the debate on these sensitive but vital themes. We combine a review of some contemporary literature on shame and shaming with reflections on in–depth conversations held with several college principals across England, and with other system leaders. The approach we adopted in those interviews reflected our FETL blog post published in April 2019 – *Responding creatively to shame in organisational life*.[2] Our aim in undertaking this work was to help develop nuanced thinking about the function and impact of shame in organisational life. Our hope is that this might support action to do things differently in the service of all those involved in further education.

Reflecting on shaming is no easy task. It requires valour and

1 FETL (Further Education Trust for Leadership). 2019. *Ending the shame game: Fostering wisdom in organisational life.* FETL
2 https://fetl.org.uk/inspiration-thinking/blogs-think-pieces/responding-creatively-to-shame-in-organisational-life/

perseverance to try to act differently to maintain dignity towards individuals when we ourselves, groups and institutions may also be experiencing feelings of vulnerability, guilt and shame. Undertaking this work led us to reflect personally about the roles we ourselves have taken up in our families, communities and organisations during our working lives. Our task produced moments of anguish, as well a positive commitment to speak up about the impact of shame. Our work is just one contribution, but we hope the ideas we put forward will provoke discussion, further exploration, research and changes in practice, especially in leadership development programmes, for leaders in further education. Reflection on the experience of organisational shame in colleges might help mitigate the risk that the sector, and those with responsibility for it, become trapped in repeating cycles in which shaming plays too great a role with too high a cost for individuals and colleges.

THE EXPERIENCE OF SHAME

Shame is often and understandably thought of as a personal experience. There is much less written about the experience of shame as an organisational dynamic. Nevertheless, concepts of personal shame provide a framework to begin to think beyond the personal and to understand how leaders in their roles risk experiencing organisational and systemic vulnerability, guilt and shame. To understand these dynamics, we must look at the roles, system and the context surrounding organisations, not just focus on individuals. We set out below some concepts drawn from existing literature on personal and organisational shame. We have found these concepts helpful in reflecting on the experiences of the leaders we interviewed.

Paraphrasing Brené Brown, the North American expert on vulnerability and leadership, at a personal level individuals experience vulnerability, guilt and shame differently. As simplified distinctions we offer the following statements from Brown's work:[3]

- I feel at risk (vulnerability)
- I made a mistake (guilt)
- I am a bad person (shame)

When experiencing shame, Brown says, individuals have an 'intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging'.[4]

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3 Brown, B. 2015. *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead.* Penguin.
4 Brown, B. 2015. *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead.* Penguin. p 69

The psychoanalyst John Steiner has also written about personal shame in his books *Psychic Retreats*[5] and *Seeing and Being Seen*,[6] drawing on the work of Melanie Klein, the Austrian–British author and psychoanalyst, who wrote extensively in the early twentieth century. Steiner describes the intense experience of embarrassment, shame and humiliation which occurs when individuals feel subject to shame through hostile attacks. He casts light on the interaction between an individual's own internal thought processes and what they experience in their roles in the external world. In a state of shame, he suggests, we are less likely in our personal and professional lives to engage in mature relationships that value and build on creative interdependency. Understanding the connections between external shaming activity and the internal implications of feeling shame can help us reflect on the unintended consequences of systemic dynamics on individual leaders.

Both further education and leadership are learning processes, and vulnerability, guilt and shame are normal human responses. Mistakes are inherent to learning and, while vulnerability when making mistakes can provoke feelings of shame, it is important to acknowledge that guilt and shame are not solely or wholly negative. They can play important roles in helping individuals protect themselves against the worst implications of vulnerability. Dr Eliat Aram, the Chief Executive of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, has argued that some degree of panic and shame are an inevitable part of transformational learning.[7] This theme is reflected in research about the experience of shame in the training of North American medical students[8] in which students reflected on an experience during their training that made them feeel 'flawed, deficient, or unworthy'. *Table 1* summarises the negative and positive effects of the students' experiences of shame.

5 Steiner, J. 2003. *Psychic retreats: Pathological organizations in psychotic, neurotic and borderline patients.* Routledge.
6 Steiner, J. 2011. *Seeing and being seen: Emerging from a psychic retreat.* Routledge.
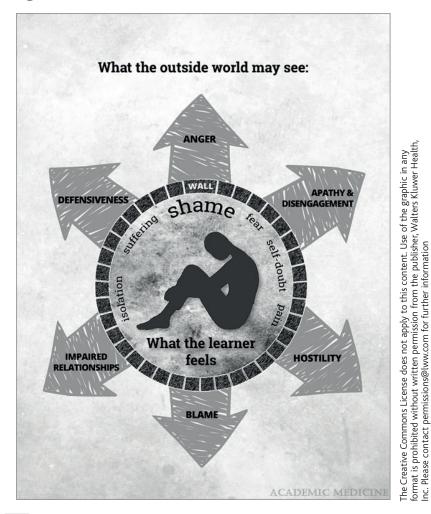7 Aram, Eliat. 2001. The experience of complexity: learning as the potential transformation of identity. PhD diss., University of Hertfordshire, 2001.
8 Bynum IV, W.E., Artino Jr, A.R., Uijtdehaage, S., Webb, A.M. and Varpio, L. 2019. Sentinel Emotional Events: The Nature, Triggers, and Effects of Shame Experiences in Medical Residents. *Academic Medicine,* 94(1), pp. 85–93.

Table 1

Positive effects
Enhanced resilience
Increased willingness to be vulnerable
Improved relationships
Desire to help other learners process shame reactions
The intensity of the emotion enhanced their memory

Negative effects
Social isolation and an impaired sense of belonging
Disengagement from learning and a loss of motivation
Diminished psychological and physical wellbeing
Reduced self–regulation and potential for unprofessional behaviour

How guilt and shame are experienced is therefore a critical factor in how we learn, and by extension in adaptive leadership. The challenge for individuals, organisations and systems is to avoid and mitigate situations in which experiences of shame develop highly negative consequences and no longer perform any protective purpose. A shamed person overcome by their sense of vulnerability may consider themselves a bad person and feel that they cannot face others, concealing feelings of fear, suffering, self–doubt and pain and leading to a state of individual isolation. They may shield themselves with anger, apathy, hostility, blame and thus further impair relationships. If this experience happens repeatedly, a person's sense of unworthiness and rejection can become embedded in deep–seated depression. In *Sentinel Emotional Events: The Nature, Triggers, and Effects of Shame Experiences in Medical Residents*,[9] the authors develop the concept of 'sentinel events', unanticipated emotional events that result in serious physical or

9 Bynum IV, W.E., Artino Jr, A.R., Uijtdehaage, S., Webb, A.M. and Varpio, L. 2019. Sentinel Emotional Events: The Nature, Triggers, and Effects of Shame Experiences in Medical Residents. *Academic Medicine,* 94(1), pp. 85–93.

psychological injury, highlighting how the emotional experiences of shame can reveal dynamics at work in learning environments. They describe how whatever sense a student may have had of their own integrity can disappear as a result of shaming dynamics. Thus, while shame can be functional, the implications when this positive role degrades are serious. The distinction between what someone experiencing shame feels, potentially hidden from view, and the behaviours they may exhibit to the outside world can be stark, as *Figure 1* illustrates.

Figure 1

SHAME IN ORGANISATIONAL LIFE

Every organisational leader understands that their institution needs to maintain its public reputation in order to win and retain the resources needed to deliver its service within its operating context. Applying Brené Brown's approach imaginatively to institutions allows us to potentially differentiate between the experiences of vulnerability, guilt and shame at an organisational level:

- This organisation or this sector is at risk (vulnerability)

- This organisation or this sector made mistakes (guilt)

- This organisation or this sector is bad (shame)

The interplay of these distinctions can also be identified in recent work on how whistleblowers are treated within organisations. In his article, *The Lost Good Self*,[10] Mark Stein discusses the concept of the organisational 'good self', again drawing on the work of Melanie Klein. Stein argues that, in our minds, we may experience ourselves as good or bad. He suggests whistleblowers are likely to be the embodiment of the organisation's good self since they speak up on negative issues and practices, embodying in principle the core values of the organisation and its workforce. It is, however, the consequent shame experienced by others in the organisation as a result that may lead to whistleblowers being stigmatised. A further interpretation could lead us to consider whether there are parallels in this analysis to situations in which leaders within organisations which come to be labelled as failing,

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10 Stein, M. 2019. The Lost Good Self: Why the whistleblower is hated and stigmatized. *Organization Studies*, November 2019.

either on grounds of performance or propriety, are subsequently viewed by others within the organisation.

Matthew Gibson, a social worker and academic, has published several articles on the experiences of shame social workers encounter in their child protection practice.[11] In this most challenging area, 'social workers are routinely faced with issues of shame as an intrinsic consequence of the matters with which social work deals'.[12] David Armstrong, a psychologist who has worked in action research and organisational consultancy for more than thirty years, has also applied Steiner's ideas to organisational life.[13] One of the key concepts he deploys is the 'organisation in the mind'. 'From this perspective,' he notes, 'each individual's internal model or constructs, conscious or unconscious, might perhaps better be seen as a secondary formation, a particular, more [or] less idiosyncratic, response to a common, shared organizational dynamic.'[14] Where a leader in further education is consumed by shame, therefore, that dynamic is likely to reflect the wider psycho–social reality of the FE sector, while contextual factors contribute to an environment in which the sector is vulnerable to such experiences of shaming.

Put another way, leaders operate through taking roles within systems, and those systems affect individual leaders' internal psychological worlds. Feelings of exposure and vulnerability are normal experiences for anyone in a leadership position when things go (or are perceived to go) wrong. Fear that critics may

attribute mistakes to leaders in a directly personal way can make it hard to admit mistakes openly. Yet leaders do much of their learning from their mistakes. This internal dilemma may be exacerbated by the response of others within the system to failure. When an organisation's delivery is compromised, consciously or unconsciously, by factors in the wider context (which may be beyond its control) the organisation's reputation and sense of 'good self' is threatened. Within the organisation, intense feelings of embarrassment, shame and humiliation may be related to individual leaders or felt by staff and others as a personal experience. Rather than exploring the nuance of complex evidence and decision–making by whole institutions, these dynamics may lead to blaming individual 'bad' persons and a search for scapegoats at a leadership level.

Two relatively recent case examples help illustrate how a combination of internal and – in particular – external shaming dynamics can lead to scapegoating:

– London Borough of Haringey children's social services: In 2007, Peter Connelly, also known as Baby P, died. Peter's mother, her boyfriend, and his brother were convicted in 2008 of causing or allowing the death of a child. The intense regulatory, government and press scrutiny of these tragic events led to the dismissal of Haringey's Director of Children's Services, Sharon Shoesmith. In 2011, however, Shoesmith won an appeal against her sacking, subsequently reaching a settlement agreement with her former employers. In 2016, she published her account – *Learning from Baby P: The politics of blame, fear and denial*[15] – in which she explores the processes of blame, fear and denial from a psycho–social perspective and the cultural tropes that she considered led to her scapegoating.

– Oxfam: In February 2018, the *Times* published an investigation into Oxfam's work in Haiti following the 2010

11 Gibson, M. 2014. Social worker shame in child and family social work: Inadequacy, failure, and the struggle to practise humanely. *Journal of social work practice, 28*(4), pp. 417–431.
    Gibson, M. 2015. Shame and guilt in child protection social work: new interpretations and opportunities for practice. *Child & Family Social Work, 20*(3), pp. 333–343.
    Gibson, M. 2016. Social worker shame: a scoping review. *The British Journal of Social Work, 46*(2), pp.549-565.
12 Gibson, M. 2015. Shame and guilt in child protection social work: new interpretations and opportunities for practice. *Child & Family Social Work, 20*(3), pp. 333–343.
13 Armstrong, D. 2018. *Organization in the mind: Psychoanalysis, group relations and organizational consultancy.* Routledge.
14 Armstrong, D. 2018. *Organization in the mind: Psychoanalysis, group relations and organizational consultancy.* Routledge, p. 5.

15 Shoesmith, S. 2016. *Learning from Baby P: The politics of blame, fear and denial.* Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

earthquake and how the charity addressed allegations of sexual misconduct. The investigation led to regulatory intervention by the Charity Commission and contributed to the resignations of key executive and non–executives within Oxfam. Yet alternative perspectives on the responsibility for these issues also exist. A former Chief Executive of the Charity Commission, Andrew Hind, has published an article titled *An alternative perspective to the regulator's inquiry report on Oxfam*[16] in which he argues the facts of the case do not justify the treatment of senior staff and trustees in the wake of the media commentary and the Charity Commission investigation.

As a result of our research into the literature of shame, we think it reasonable to suggest that some, at least, of the shaming experienced by college leaders stems from the combination of external regulatory and public dynamics with a sense of organisational shame and loss of the 'good self' felt within individual colleges. We turn now to consider some contextual factors that may help explain the current vulnerability of further education to shaming activity.

16 https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/voices/andrew-hind-oxfam-an-alternative-perspective.html

SHAMING AND THE CONTEXT OF FURTHER EDUCATION

The FE sector has been subject to a range of different regulatory approaches since incorporation. It is now primarily regulated through Ofsted, the Office of the Further Education Commissioner and the Education and Skills Funding Agency; as well as other regulatory bodies such as the Health and Safety Executive and the Information Commissioner. National political leadership in many policy areas experiences rapid turnover as ministers move to new portfolios; this has been especially true of the ministers responsible for the FE portfolio, and the sector has experienced frequent shifts in policy. Within this overarching context are more specific factors which may exacerbate the likelihood and impact of external shaming. Changing dynamics have been particularly strongly felt in recent years. As one principal commented:

> *We have faced a perfect storm. Profound changes have taken place over the last three years at least, affecting all aspects of the college's contexts: political, economic, social, professional and personal. These have principally impacted on the leadership and management at the outer boundary of the college.*

Another interviewee was explicit about the impact of the changing operating context on their role:

> *The deteriorating context is the major influence on my current role as Principal and therefore on the college as a whole.*

In our interviews we heard concern about the extent to which the practice of regulation has evolved into rituals of verification.[17] These are regulatory approaches with which the further

17 Power, M. 1997. *The audit society: Rituals of verification.* OUP, Oxford.

education sector complies but where leaders lack confidence in their value added. We were told that a standardised approach does not take sufficient account of local context to maintain the confidence of those being regulated. We were also told about the impact of the way in which regulation has in practice operated. Communication practices are perceived as having a corrosive and undermining impact on college leadership while shaming language and behaviours in the media (and on social media) are seen as being used to assert dominance, to reinforce inclusion and exclusion, and to focus blame on individuals rather than on systems and the context in which colleges operate. The flames of shame are easily fanned as the gaze on people and institutions who are shamed is e–connected. One interviewee argued that the sector has experienced:

> *The football manager approach to college leadership – dump them the minute they appear to be on a losing streak. It's easier to use vilification, rather than mature accountability.*

Weaponising shame also has the potential to corrode both learning and development, undermine social collaboration and weaken cohesion within organisations and networks, in this case the wider further education sector. Local and general news media, including professional education media, are seen to convey volatile stories about colleges and to have a significant impact on the reputations both of colleges and of named staff, in particular principals. The impact of the combination of regulation and media exposure drove many of our interviewees' concerns. The sense that *'we face a climate of blame rather than enquiry'* was common. Interviewees were concerned that such a climate constrained the way they operate, with one baldly stating:

> *I live in fear, terrified of the organisation failing; it makes me risk averse and focusing inwards.*

Principals are concerned by the negative impact of the culture of shame not just for themselves but also on securing the best outcomes for learners. One stated:

> *Of course, I want the business to keep on improving but it's hard to address when we're frightened of being shamed by the regulators.*

The starkest view of how the regulatory approach is perceived by some college leaders was expressed simply by one interviewee who said: *'the powers–that–be want scalps'.*

We may distrust institutions, but we cannot live without them. Our own distrust may lead us to criticise the very institutions we depend on. So, when institutions are seen to fail, the search for personal scapegoats becomes intense and long–lasting. We believe that part of the prevailing dynamic around vulnerability, guilt and shame results from the ambivalence about institutions in modern society. The further education sector operates within this wider context; its own dynamics were summarised by one interviewee who said: *'There is an appetite for blame which the press fosters.'* The sense that 'blame' was a driving factor in how the sector is regulated and perceived was strong. Interviewees linked this appetite for blame to an unwillingness to tackle systemic issues, with one saying:

> *It's so easy to blame individuals when operating in a dysfunctional system. That approach doesn't lead to improvement.*

During our discussions, interviewees also highlighted the negative consequences on the ability to recognise and tackle mistakes in a constructive way, with one arguing:

> *When shaming brutality is at play, ordinary guilt about mistakes can't appear.*

These external dynamics also drive behaviour within organisations. Interviewees discussed how governors respond to external pressures on colleges. The pressure on lay governors, much of whose life and professional expertise lies outside the field of education, can distance them from the complexity of the internal life of their college. Despite the formal structures,

in practice principals, with their professional colleagues, become more exposed and isolated in the face of external drivers of guilt and shame.

At the outer boundary of the college's activities, policies set from outside the sector – or by those with limited sector experience – may lose sight of the reality that the student–teacher interface is the core of everything that is done to achieve the college's purpose. Interviewees perceived an absence of clear and coherent government leadership about what the FE sector is for. This included a lack of familiarity with the sector and rapid turnover of ministers, a temptation to treat further education as if it were a single integrated system rather than an interconnected network of autonomous systems in competition. One interviewee argued that, '*the system under present government policies is not interested in learning…*', while another suggested:

> *I think the learners are getting a worse deal in our over–regulated environment than they did before incorporation*.

Interviewees also spoke of government's lack of grasp of local realities and the consequent impact on unrealistic target–setting for colleges operating in different local environments. For example, changes in local economies have powerful consequences for colleges. Principals in areas which had suffered from the collapse of historic industries may be part of broader efforts to tackle a local culture suffering loss of morale. Central government evaluations, it was felt, were not taking such factors into account in reaching judgements and decisions about college closures or mergers. As one interviewee commented:

> *There isn't a contextualised approach to regulation. As a principal, I have to argue very hard for attention to my particular community context. Sometimes I have not been successful*.

The strong impression given by our interviewees is that successive governments have used regulation as a means of intervention rather than a tool to drive improvement based on an understanding of educational purpose. OFSTED guidelines for inspection, for example, are perceived to have stilted how colleges have been assessed, creating difficulties in getting buy–in from staff. The overall thrust, for our interviewees, has weakened the opportunity to address underlying organisational problems based on professional understanding. One interviewee commented:

> *There is a serious loss of confidence in values related to educational professionalism in the face of the values of lawyers and accountants*.

The impact of frustration on behaviours was illustrated thus:

> *New curriculum requirements have been linked with inadequate funding for the new demands. Aspects of our regulatory environment can drive us into a fight–or–flight state*.

The personal impact on college leaders

All the principals we spoke to highlighted a personal sense of isolation and consequent vulnerability. They had also seen what had been happening to their colleagues and peers and recognised their situations with empathy. They felt anguish and compassion for colleagues who had been shamed by their presumed failure as leaders, with one interviewee telling us:

> *My heart goes out to those of my colleagues whose lives and wellbeing have been deeply affected by shame. I know that others begin to worry that they will be next to be targeted for shame!*

Interviewees recognised that sometimes they may have been in similar scenarios to those experiencing shaming but were fortunate that they themselves but had not yet faced similar retribution. The strength of feeling can be summed up by one response, seeking those responsible for shaming activities to see their cost:

> *I want the shamers to know the impact of their behaviours*.

Our interviewees were deeply aware of the turnover in college leadership. Some admitted that circumstances might arise in which they would also consider opportunities to leave the role or the sector, influenced by the overall atmosphere and culture. There was a common sense of yearning for a longer–term outlook and for concerted collaborative effort to become cultural norms across the sector.

The 'loneliness' of principals' experience of leadership was frequently commented upon. Although interviewees recognised that other leaders in the sector were also feeling isolated, a common theme was the absence of appropriate supportive peer networks across the sector. Relationships with the local stakeholders were often considered collegiate, but interviewees noted that such relationships could be dependent on the state of their local economies.

Interviewees praised what they saw as the valour and perseverance of their fellow leaders in the sector in picking themselves up and dusting themselves down to fight another day in a challenging operating environment. In particular, we noted a sense of courageous defiance in the face of what are perceived to be unreasonable and ineffective regulatory requirements. Such challenges were exacerbated for some interviewees by tensions between the role of principal and those of the board, its chair and the clerk. There was, however, also a recognition that some of these tensions were normal and reflected different professional perspectives, requiring dialogue and effort to work through. These roles are effectively organisational pressure points at which diverse forces can be reconciled and new energy released.

One principal described their personal journey as paralleled by that of many of their staff. It was one in which they had to develop personal resilience in the first place, stumbling and then coming back, repairing those responses that made them vulnerable, and eventually finding a degree of freedom as a result. For this interviewee, an underlying objective was to develop a college culture working to professional standards to help sustain

everyone engaged in the college's collective mission. In a sense, this approach to taking one's role as principal provided a paradigm for every other role in the college.

How principals respond

The weight of these accumulated accounts might lead one to expect a story of depression and despair. Far from it. The story of the principals we met was inspiring. At the heart of what they told us was their commitment to students, formulated in a shared purpose and vision for their college. One principal went straight to the point, saying:

> *When your college is underperforming and not meeting the needs of students, as their principal you feel shame. You need to find the way of moving from the experience of your personal shame to understanding the institutional shame.*

In different ways, principals saw themselves in their roles as leading learners. This was not a superficial comment. One leader summarised what others also said in their own ways:

> *A principal needs to work consciously with one's own most profound values and sense of vocation, judging how one deals with the experience of one's own vulnerability: recognise that 'bad things' happen but that doesn't make you a bad person.*

Most consistently, interviewees reflected that their strength of mission was a key driver for personal and institutional resilience. Sometimes, this inspiration can be reflected in relatively simple measures,:

> *We have our college values printed on our lanyards and it reminds me every day what we've agreed is important for our endeavour.*

Our interviewees also recognised the value of doubt, reflection and an acceptance of vulnerability in managing their own personal resilience. One noted that, *'Reflection is a catalyst for change; it should not provoke humiliation'*. The broader benefit of

reflection came through strongly in one interviewees' comment that:

> *I see doubt as a resource to use constructively, to question the status quo. I use my anxiety to prowl my environment and ask questions about what is the right way to improve my college.*

As noted above, principals did however feel that links with their peers were not as strong as they might be. At worst, this has a deep effect on individuals, with one stating, *'There is a lack of peer support for principals. At moments of great challenge, I felt completely alone.'* Interviewees felt the need for a consolidated, self–organised means to address this contextual source of vulnerability. Some also ascribed a lack of peer support to the wider context of the sector. As one noted:

> *I used to be able to go to colleagues to learn how they had dealt with issues. Competition in the sector has made it less likely that I will reveal my vulnerability as a principal either in the region or in my group.*

Reflections

Based on our review of relevant literature and interviews with a small number of system leaders in the further education field, we believe that the experience of organisational shame is widely felt among leaders. By developing an understanding of the experience of 'sentinel' emotional events, we also feel leaders in the sector may find a means towards managing their experience of shaming when it appears in their organisation and the wider sector. We believe an openness to dialogue and reflection is at the heart of these strategies: when individuals can recognise our sentinel experiences of shame, they open the possibility of discussing these experiences in their communities of practice. Doing so creates a context in which responses can be devised and implemented to challenge and mitigate the impact of shaming. Thus, principals in their leadership roles can model a transformational form of learning, which can then permeate every corner of their college in its context.

Each of the principals we spoke to described how they saw the impact of austerity in the ways their colleges are funded, in the lives of their students and how their local communities are affected by poverty. Nevertheless, we are heartened by Andrade's reminder: 'It seems like a simple point, but teachers who want to build material hope must understand that quality teaching is the most significant "material" resource they have to offer youth.'[18]

In a recent paper, Matthieu Daum, Director with Nexus Consultation, explores the organisational and social dynamics that play out when individuals deny and disown the part they play in co–creating the world they live in.[19] Our interviews with further education leaders illustrated how the experience of organisational shame is insidious. Shame can creep into the souls of individuals as they take up their roles within organisations. Reflecting on our organisational lives can be arduous and painful. When shame takes hold, either personally or organisationally, the experience can be profoundly disturbing and the impact severe. We believe that examining the experience of shame in our personal lives both as individuals, and in groups and institutions, is the first step toward creating more sustaining environments in which to live and work.

From our small sample of principals, we witnessed deep commitment to leading colleges to serve students and their local communities. This commitment was lived daily, despite principals running the risk of being shamed personally and organisationally. It may be that a different focus of attention from government would help maximise the effect of this abundant resource of commitment and sense of purpose. A professional sense of vocation for learning which unites college staff in serving their local economic and social communities is – as our principals demonstrate – a potentially generative force.

18 Duncan-Andrade, J. 2009. Note to educators: Hope required when growing roses in concrete. *Harvard Educational Review, 79*(2), pp. 181–194.
19 Daum, M. 2019. Owning our part: from denial-based business to a regenerative economy. *Organisational and Social Dynamics,* 19(2), pp. 249–263.

Stephen Exley, the Times Education Supplement's Further Education Editor wrote an article following the 2019 Association of Colleges conference entitled *'Why college leaders must learn to embrace failure'*.[20] Exley reports that there was a refreshingly reflective tone in the debates at this event with leaders speaking candidly about their experience of leading the sector. Exley quotes Kate Webb of the *Windsor Forest Colleges Group* arguing,

> *We need to make sure that failure doesn't become a stigma … We have to make sure we don't fetishise failure, that we don't share schadenfreude for failure, because we have to learn from our failures, because we are better than that as a sector.*

We hope that one impact of this paper might be to prompt people within the sector to examine the topic of organisational shame further. Structured reflection might just permit a more audacious hope to flourish, enabling toxic organisational shame to be faced and responded to with virtue. It is essential that they do for, as one interviewee expressed it:

> *Our cities and towns deserve good colleges.*

20 https://www.tes.com/news/why-college-leaders-must-learn-embrace-failure

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