

Let the light in: From shame to repair

A new FETL report reflects on the personal and institutional impact of shame, and how leaders and organisations can begin the process of recovery and repair

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The Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) has published the fourth and final report in its series on shame and repair and their impact on FE and skills. While previous reports focused on shame in organisational life, the impact on 'shamed' leaders, and the role of the regulatory system, this report, by Bob Townley of the University of York, examines the personal and institutional costs of systemic blaming and shaming, and the process of reflection, learning and repair that can help leaders and their organisations recover and move forward.

Letting the light in: The damage that shame does and how to repair it builds on the previous three FETL publications, and a range of practical, contemporary resources on leadership, to understand the cost of shame and how we can rebuild in a positive, reparative way.

Dame Ruth Silver, President of FETL, said: 'This is a difficult topic to talk about – it implies vulnerability in leaders, which can be difficult for both leaders and staff to acknowledge, and it demands that we look unflinchingly at the impact of the systems of regulation, accountability and oversight in the FE sector, as well as at the ways in which we judge apparent failure, and the kinds of support that are available to colleagues when things do go wrong. It is important too to remember that this is new ground. We are testing new ideas and approaches and I have not expected our authors to deliver the right answers or always to know for certain they are asking the right questions.'

'It would be wrong, therefore, to read this occasional paper in the hope of acquiring an off-the-shelf, oven-ready solution to repair-damaged institutions, tarnished reputations, bruised colleagues or the fading confidence of colleagues. Do read it, however, if you know about, or, indeed, grasp the complexity of repairing from shame and the intricacy involved in the important reclamation of the knowledge that can help it to happen. Read it if you want to see a more compassionate, human-centred sector, or simply if you want to understand – what could be more human than that.

It is telling, I feel, that, in concluding his reflections, Dr Townley notes that he feels he knows more about damage than he does about repair. I suspect this is widely true, though seldom acknowledged. It helps explain why it is so important that we have this conversation. Many of us are hopelessly unprepared for the prospect of failure, real or perceived, yet dealing with it positively is a significant part of life and leadership. Recognising the need is a critical part of the process of repair and recovery, and points encouragingly to the next steps in the development of generative thinking within the sector around these issues.'

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