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The Need for Time and Space for Leadership Development in Learning and Teaching

Hannah-Louise Holmes

Introduction

As an academic and senior leader in higher education (HE), I am driven to achieve inclusivity in the student and staff experience. My approach to teaching and learning aligns with the theory of social interaction as put forward by Lev Vygotsky (1962). My interpretation of this theory is that a teacher should collaborate with his or her students in order to help facilitate meaningful construction in students. In academia, I observe a close correlation between the teaching strategy of lecturers and the style they adopt in leadership. I find that the leadership style I have is a mirror of the approaches which have been successful in supporting students. Both seek to bring out the best in individuals and empower them to achieve goals; in the case of students both personal and academic, and in the academic team both personal and collective goals.

I have been fortunate in my career to progress to a senior role within a UK post-92 HE Institution. I work in a large Faculty of Business and Law with about 10,000 students, which allows for significant impact within leadership positions. Whilst my role requires me to support academics in all aspects of their roles, this chapter will focus on my journey as a successful leader of learning and teaching. As is common in the field of education (European Commission, 2010), my career development, career stages and transition have been supported by mentors. Mentoring has been the tool through which I have sought refuge and guidance, a private space separate and protected from my front-facing roles and responsibilities. My use of mentoring can be seen through the lens of Goffman's *Presentation of Self* (1959), where I use mentoring to both manage the front self I portray in my workspaces, and as a private outlet for a presentation of self

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that is less confident and clear as I work through issues both professional and personal before stepping back into my front self.

In this sense, mentoring has been crucial in giving me both the space (defined as separation from those directly involved in my teaching and/or leadership roles) and time (interpreted as time away from the action or doing part of the role) that I needed to share and shape ideas. Mentoring has allowed me both time and space to focus on my personal development and confront insecurities and to develop coherent plans and approaches. This separate space and time have allowed me to present publicly as a calm, organized and self-assured leader.

Central to my leadership journey have been various forms of vulnerabilities. These have arisen due to me being young, being a female and being a leader in teaching and learning who has developed from the ranks within my subject area. My journey and reflection examine how I have fought to present a confident front self even when in my private self I have not shared the same feeling. Central to my journey of leadership in teaching and learning has been the role of mentors, my inclusive leadership approach and my organizational skills and attention to detail.

Leadership in Higher Education

Leite (2015) examined democratic leadership in higher education and, drawing on work by Lewin, Lippitt and White (1939), identified three main groups of leadership styles: authoritarian, democratic and laissez-faire. Reflecting on the work of Leite (2015), we can identify why these styles are effective and any problems which may occur when using these styles on a daily basis in the workplace. 'Authoritarian leaders determined the policies, expectations, and details about the processes. They tended not to share future steps but would keep that information to themselves until it was time to share the information so that tasks could be completed. This leadership style hindered creativity in problem solving and seemed impersonal' (Leite, 2015). In comparison, Gameda and Lee (2020) identify laissez-faire leadership as being 'characterized by non-involvement, showing indifference, being absent when needed, overlooking achievements and problems as well. It is a style of leadership in which leaders offer very little direction and allow group members to make decisions on their own' (Gameda and Lee, 2020, p. 3). These findings seemed to indicate that laissez-faire leadership may work in situations where the followers were highly skilled and required little supervision.

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Turning the discussion to followers, Belbin (1996) identified five different styles of followers: receptive, self-reliant, collaborative, informative and reciprocating. With different followers within organizations, there will be times when there is a leadership style that does not work effectively because of the follower style. Therefore, a leader might be unsuccessful in one situation, but successful in another. Effective leaders should be able to change their leadership style to fit different situations.

I do not believe there is one single approach to leadership that can be consistently applied and result in success in every circumstance. To me, leadership comprises a multiplicity of approaches determined by the situation and/or individual(s) that form part of that. Overall, I adopt a democratic approach driven by the positive outcomes of such an approach described by Ogunola, Kalejaiye and Abrifor (2013). However, when the situation demands it, for example, time is short and the decision must be taken immediately to avoid any form of harm arising, I switch quickly to a more autocratic and directive form of leadership. However, in keeping with my overarching belief in open and transparent leadership, I ensure that when the immediacy of a situation has passed, I explain to stakeholders the reasons for the decision and lack of appropriate consultation. In my experience, leadership sometimes requires quick decisions and action; confidence to do this is essential. At other times, slow and meticulous planning – drawing in different stakeholders and seeking to identify where influence is required – is essential to building long-term strategic vision and transformational change in institutions. My personal approach to leadership has always been to prioritize kindness and empathy, attempting to treat people as individuals rather than as a collective. Further, I have a strong sense of duty and responsibility for my team’s well-being and personal development. I have a belief that being authentic, honest, calm and organized is a foundation of forming trust as a leader, being someone who the team feels they can rely on, who is resilient to support or direct the team. This approach to leadership is however not sustainable in the long run without support. Therefore, to achieve this, I find spaces to share any worries or concerns in order to build my strength and resilience so I can maintain energy with the team. Creating time and space for me to gather the emotional skills or knowledge I need to perform my leadership roles has been key throughout my career.

However, leading throughout the Covid-19 crisis (UNDP, 2021), the separation between my work and home spaces has blurred. My experience is reflective of colleagues in the sector (Jandrić et al., 2020). For example, the requirement to work from home meant that I no longer had a daily commute,

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blurring my work and family personas. I could no longer use the space on the commute to transition from being mum and wife to being a professional and worker.

Through the disruption of Covid-19 and difficulties of maintaining separate spaces between work, home and personal struggles, I have understood leadership in a broader way than before. I have recognized that it is not a weakness to remove some of the gloss from the front self I present and that this is welcomed and supported by the team. Indeed, I have, in discussion with colleagues, understood that a glossy image can be intimidating or demoralizing as team members believe the ‘front self’ presentation. They feel I cannot relate to their situation as I appear so in control or that they are somehow weak or ineffective when looking at the apparent ease with which I seem to cope with challenging situations. Leadership can be shown through honesty about struggles and not completely retreating to private spaces to gain composure for a ‘front self’ representation. This has been an important lesson to me as, through the crisis, I have learned to share more of myself and some aspects of my family life, including the difficulties of managing both childcare and mental health challenges of continuous lockdowns (McMullan et al., 2021). Notwithstanding, I have done this in a manner that allowed me to remain in control of what I shared, that is not through uncontrolled emotional responses but through retrospective openness about difficulties I have faced. This has added a layer to my leadership that has publicly revealed a more fragile side, enabling people to see that, although I seek to remain reliable and supportive of the team, I share and deeply relate to the challenges they also encounter. As a leader in teaching and learning, I feel that I have grown throughout my time in HE to be comfortable presenting a more raw, fragile and arguably more authentic persona to the teams I support. In many respects, this has released unnecessary pressure that I placed on myself and has allowed me to build stronger relationships with people through showing a vulnerability that is more relatable to colleagues.

Overview of My Career in Academia

My career in academia started in 2005 as an associate lecturer. This commenced immediately after completing the postgraduate certificate in business education (PGCE). I was therefore very young when entering academia and one of the youngest in the university when being promoted. I was also a ‘first-generation’ student and had no family history or background in higher education, which

added to the ‘imposter syndrome’ I had. I was also conscious that both initially in economics and then latterly in accounting, finance and banking (AFB), it was predominately male environments.

As I have grown professionally, and personally, the use of mentors and coaches has been invaluable in creating both time and space for me in which to breathe, take stock and provide my own safe space.

It is interesting for me to reflect at the current point in my career about how much of my leadership is shaped by experiences from my early career. It is during these periods that I developed the confidence to utilize different streams of information to enhance the learning environment and to lead change across programmes. The learning I did at these stages is fundamental to my ability to steer the department. My leadership encourages others to find time and space for personal and professional development, reflection and innovation. This may be through mentoring, coaching or academic networks. Without space and time, innovation is restricted. I feel privileged to be able to undertake my current leadership roles, but, even as my confidence grows, I continue to draw on my peers, including mentors and close colleagues, for support.

I will use interconnected periods in time that correspond to leadership roles I have held to examine my experiences and learning as a professional. These time periods track my career progression from early career academic to my current role as head of department (HoD).

In 2012, I became undergraduate coordinator (UGC) in economics, which extended my involvement and reach in terms of responsibility for teaching and learning as I assumed the role of leading these areas for the programme. The UGC role in my faculty is broadly equivalent to programme leader or subject leader in other institutions. This was my first experience of leadership; I was able to have some influence in the overall planning and delivery of the programme and bring my teaching and leadership philosophy into the department. Prior to taking on the role, relationships between academics in the department were strained due to historic disagreements over the direction and shape of the programme resulting in fractious relations between the prior leadership and the wider team. Taking on this role, I championed collaboration and teamwork, introducing a transparent and inclusive approach to decision-making. I shaped this around a collective ambition to achieve the programme Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). I knew from being part of the department for a number of years that some groups felt excluded and undervalued; this drove me to develop a culture where all voices and opinions were of equal value. During my time in HE, and through different roles, I closely observed other leaders and, drawing

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on my own values and beliefs, understood that in most scenarios an inclusive approach was the most effective and positive approach. I took time to speak individually with people and to bring people together in open forums for discussion around agreeing on a collective vision and sought to demonstrate the value of each colleague as an individual within the team. As academics, I knew we all shared a common belief in the power and importance of high-quality education and research, but that emphasis needed to be spread evenly across these, sometimes perceived to be competing, perspectives.

An important aspect of responsibility was my role in the programme review for economics in 2014. I led this and I wanted to ensure that the programme was reviewed to reflect the changing needs of students, for example, embedded essential graduate skills through an appropriate assessment strategy and adapted curriculum to ensure student success, such as progression and retention, and student experience. The strong overarching value of inclusive practice that drives my behaviours informed my vision for the programme. From observational experience of peers, and from my own values, I believe that developing programmes and structures that support a feeling of belonging and value in students and staff will result in better outcomes for both. For students, I see this being reflected in their satisfaction with, and performance on, the programme. For academics, this results in a more positive attitude towards work. To make the programme review process a success, I needed to ensure that the academic staff were supportive of changes and contributed to the planning discussions. This was important to me as I saw the programme review as an opportunity to change the long-standing division in the department and to bring the team together around a common objective. I knew that to build a strong and united department, everyone needed to feel that they were seen and heard. Whilst I had a strong vision for the department and understanding of what was needed to achieve it, I had concerns around my age and perceived legitimacy from colleagues who, prior to my promotion, I had worked with at the same or lower grade. To achieve my vision of using the programme review as a tool for uniting the team through strong and inclusive leadership, I approached the university coaching community and was matched to an academic who supported me as I progressed through my journey of leadership in learning and teaching.

Drawing on the Chartered Institute of Professional Development (CIPD) framework (CIPD, 2021), the coaching community comprised staff from the institution who have completed coaching development programmes equipping them with the skills needed to support colleagues. As my coach was from a different faculty, I was able to be my private self in the space and to talk

openly and honestly about what I wanted to achieve, the barriers that would cause difficulties and how to overcome them. The support I received from this relationship, and having a space where I could be honest about my concerns and vulnerabilities, was transformational. By planning and talking through approaches and scenarios in advance of implementing them, I was able to appear calm, self-assured and organized to the programme team. This was important to me as I wanted to instil confidence in the team. I felt conscious about carefully managing the front self that I presented to the department and that displaying emotional responses or lack of organization and planning in front of my peers would be seen as weakness and attributed to my age and gender, undermining my leadership, and perceived suitability to be in the role. Briscoll (2016) discusses how gendered stereotypes can lead to biased evaluations of female leaders, and I have always been conscious about remaining in control of my own emotions to try and mitigate this sort of bias. To the academics, I did not appear affected by challenging behaviours and attempts to undermine my authority through being deliberately argumentative and obtuse. However, privately, and supported by my coach, there were tears as I navigated the complexities of managing academic colleagues and achieving consensus and collaboration. The journey in the department was difficult; I was moving the culture from highly fractious to collegiate and collaborative, but managing that transition was difficult as I had to put a lot of time and effort into building the team's trust in me and in each other. I held a lot of individual conversations with members of the department and often felt that if I made an error in my use of language, or took the wrong approach to discussions and meetings, the walls around people would be rebuilt. I felt every interaction, every email, every meeting posed a risk, particularly in the early stages as long-standing feelings of hurt and division were still dominating interactions within the department. The anxiety of getting something wrong, being under or wrongly prepared, or inadvertently making someone feel they were not equally valued often left me feeling exhausted and sometimes overwhelmed. The private spaces and opportunities to discuss and refine communications and approach provided me with an opportunity to let down my guard and share my anxieties and vulnerabilities. During this stage of my teaching and learning leadership journey, I started to understand the importance of continually aligning my behaviours to my values and using the private spaces to build resilience. At times, it was draining to manage negative and unsupportive reactions towards me, but over time, and continuing to demonstrate a consistent approach and leadership style, team members started to become more cooperative, and trust was slowly established alongside respect.

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Without the support of a coach to allow an outlet for frustrations, these could have bubbled over into my front self, undermining the efforts to build relations with the team.

One specific example I recall was the organizing and execution of a meeting that I had planned with my coach. The objective was to bring the academic team together and, through a workshop approach, identify in four areas (research, teaching, assessment and student support) what we were doing well, what we should change and how we would change. The meeting was designed to allow the team an opportunity to shape the four areas and concluded with each attendee agreeing to take an action away and assume ownership and accountability for delivering it. The structure, agenda and format of the meeting were planned over a number of weeks. My coach had repeatedly advised me that not all of the team would attend but to focus on those that do, ensuring clear changes arose from the meeting, meaning those who chose not to attend would feel that they had missed out on something important. On the day of the meeting, at the time the meeting was due to begin, I stood in the room surrounded by flip chart paper and all my plans for the day, and no department colleagues arrived. It was the first time that I thought I was going to cry outside of a private space. As I waited and tried to remind myself that this was a journey and I had to be patient, a few colleagues arrived. After ten minutes, we had two-thirds of the team in attendance, and the meeting started. That meeting was the first of a number I led. Each time, as predicted by my coach, more colleagues attended until it became more unusual not to attend. The guidance of being patient as a leader and bringing my team along with me by gradually winning their confidence has been at the heart of every role I have moved into since.

During the period of time leading the programme, the National Student Survey (NSS) improved from 68 per cent to 92 per cent (National Student Survey, 2021), and progression improved from 75 per cent to 90 per cent, exceeding department KPIs. I believe that this was due to a student-centred pedagogic approach and the collaboration and collegiality created in the department.

Growing Confidence in the Private and Front Self

At the start of my role as HoD in accounting, finance and banking, I moved from leading a team of sixteen academics and 300 students to over forty academics and about 1,500 students. Furthermore, as a female aged thirty-seven, with an (at the time) eleven-month-old daughter, leading in a predominantly male subject

area (King, Ortenblad and Ladge, 2018), I was not the stereotypical image of a HoD. To help overcome my imposter syndrome, transition into the role and management of my private and front self, I was supported by a coach, but in a change from my previous experience, they were external to the institution.

Focusing firstly on the first year as HoD, in the same way that I was able to extend my impact as a leader when moving from lecturer to UGC, I was now able to do this across the full department. Furthermore, I had a faculty-level role in addressing award and progression gaps. In this regard, I had influence over activity across the faculty through the implementation of approaches to different learning environments. Unlike when I was new to previous leadership roles, at the time of this promotion, I had a young child, and this added another layer to how I managed my time and spaces since both were compressed to include and balance parenting responsibilities. When I was promoted to HoD, I had been back at work for six months after taking four months of maternity leave due to family reasons. I am fortunate in that I have always been well supported in my career by my husband and parents.

With their support, the first year of my role as HoD was not significantly impacted by having a young child. I felt confident that I was balancing things and was able to maintain a clear separation between my personal and work lives, often using the commuting time to transition from one persona to another, that is Mummy to HoD and back to Mummy. However, this changed significantly in the second year of my HoD tenure with the Covid-19 pandemic.

Since becoming the HoD, the department has undergone a periodic review, and I have overseen this process for all programmes in the department. Within this role, I have oversight of ten programmes across undergraduate and taught postgraduate levels and of associated programme leaders. This has been very interesting as I have been able draw on my previous experiences to support the department and have used this as an opportunity to reshape the learning and teaching environment. Very few of the academics, including those in the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), had been involved in a previous periodic review. This lack of experience meant that I adopted both a leader and mentor role throughout the process. The lessons that I took from the previous review were that it was essential to be organized, open to student and staff contributions and clear on the overall objectives.

I was keen to use this programme review as an opportunity to work closely with the academic staff to ensure that the programme review reflected their values, having seen how powerful this approach was in my role as UGC. As a leader in learning and teaching, this programme review afforded me an early

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opportunity to work on a project with every member of the academic team and to 'walk the talk' on the values that I wanted to bring into the team. On my first day as HoD, I ran a facilitated workshop to determine the values and beliefs that were important to staff. The rationale for holding this meeting was drawn directly from the coaching I received as a UGC, providing an opportunity for teams to voice their views, shape the objectives of the department and create a culture of shared accountability. I wanted to continue my journey as a HE leader that demonstrated inclusive practice and to demonstrate that this could result in transformational change at department level. In October 2018, we launched the programme review planning process with a departmental meeting. Prior to the first meeting, I had worked with the SLT to agree a set of principles that we would apply, for example, examinations could only be applied in exemption-based units, digital skills and personal development would run across all three years and we would create a non-exemption route for students. These principles were underpinned by feedback from various stakeholders and split metric data.

The first meeting asked staff to keep in mind the values they had agreed in September and the principles from the SLT but to then shape a new programme to launch in 2020. The approach that I took in this second programme review was to ensure a clear timeline, schedule and assigned roles and responsibilities. I outlined this timeline at the first meeting with commitments from the SLT in terms of information that would be provided to support the department planning, for example, current and prospective student, alumni and employer feedback. The timeline and process worked really well. Over three meetings, we were able to completely redesign the programme and reach full consensus. Part of the learning from my first programme review was to plan the process in advance and outline parameters that the staff had to work within. This worked very well as we did not have endless discussions about small details but kept focused on the bigger picture in a clear and managed set of discussions.

I feel that I approached this second programme review with a more mature and clear approach because of the confidence I was able to draw on from earlier stages in my leadership journey. This allowed me more time to think about the outcomes we wanted to achieve and to listen carefully to all parties. I was also able to make better use of research to inform the programme changes. Whilst I felt that the economics programme review changes were particularly good and dramatically improved the programme, I feel that learning the process did detract from my ability to make truly innovative changes to the delivery and assessment. In this most recent review, we have been bolder and that is because I have been able to spend less time on the process and more time on leading

and shaping the teaching and assessment strategy. The resulting impact on my leadership was that I could spend more time on the softer aspects of the role, providing more individualized support and time for discussion around innovation in curriculum development.

Similar to the first months in my role as UGC, externally I presented as an HoD who was confident, organized and in control of the situation. Privately, I was drawing on the support of a coach to manage imposter syndrome and uncertainty over how to best manage situations. The private spaces for reflection and openness around my areas of weakness provided an opportunity for me to develop as an individual and leader, particularly developing the confidence to recognize and value my own strengths. Moving from a leadership position with sixteen academics to over forty meant finding different ways to achieve the same sense of collaboration, transparency and co-creation that I value so highly and that I believe underpin the successful outcomes in previous roles.

I sought ways to embed more inclusive and transparent approaches into the department practices. I introduced a bi-weekly conference call that all department staff are invited to call into. Further to this, I changed the approach taken to SLT meetings by running a five-weekly cycle with invites extended to academics across the department in key roles to enable focused and supportive discussions on their areas of responsibility. This has been crucial in creating a collegiate approach to adapting the teaching and learning environment. One of the key challenges I want to address is ensuring that staff still feel comfortable to share their issues and critical reflections on the department operations and management so that I can ensure I respond and adapt.

Additional means of ensuring that colleagues are engaged has been achieved through the introduction of one-to-one meetings between line managers and those who they manage and the adoption of a coaching approach to meetings with staff. To support a high-quality teaching and learning environment, they function as a safe space for conversations about department or individual performance. The discussions seek to encourage staff to reflect on their own practice and development. They encourage staff to identify ways they can improve their practice and to improve the outcomes for students. To help with this process, staff are encouraged to undertake mentoring and/or coaching to support their development.

External to my own institution, the coaching helped me to develop the confidence to present myself as the HoD and to assure existing and potential partners and stakeholders that I am a competent HoD. I recall one example, early in my role as HoD, where I attended an external event and, in a networking

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discussion, presented myself as the HoD. The other person took several attempts to clarify what I meant, clearly not immediately able to see that I could be the head for a whole department. The questions, as they sought clarification, ranged from ‘Head of a year group or undergraduates?’, ‘Head of a programme area?’, followed by an awkward silence as I quietly responded, ‘I am just the Head of Department, the whole department, all of the programmes.’ Similar to the reflections of Wilkinson (2020), the awkward silence and the look of disbelief on the face of the other person will always stay with me; sometimes it can still tap me on the shoulder and shatter my confidence, forcing me to return to the coaching conversations and techniques I developed afterwards. That conversation was the moment that I knew I had to present externally as unapologetic for holding the position and own the title, or there would be a detrimental impact on the department’s external positioning, creating barriers to opportunities for both staff and students. Without a coach at that time, I am unsure how I would have been able to achieve the self-belief I needed. As described by Sherman (2013), initially I played a role, I acted the part, I prepared myself tirelessly for external meetings to know who would be there and to ensure I had conversational topics that presented the department and university favourably. Eventually, my network started to expand, and spaces that had previously been filled with unfamiliar faces started to include people I had formed relationships with in previous interactions. Over time, I realized I was no longer consciously playing a part; I was genuinely feeling assured in the spaces I was inhabiting and even enjoying these events and spaces. This transformation has enabled me to find and exploit opportunities for my department, the wider faculty, and for our students.

The main crisis I have encountered in the role, eighteen months into it, was Covid-19; this resulted in me guiding the department and students through a very challenging situation. In a fortunate series of events, when Covid-19 impacted, I was receiving mentorship, from a highly experienced professor in the sector, in support of several departmental strategies I was seeking to develop. In similarity to the discussion by Watermeyer et al. (2020), Covid-19 resulted in university campus closures and an immediate move to online working, teaching and assessment from our homes. The various responsibilities, strategies, decisions and actions that took place during this period are too numerous to outline. Fundamental changes to our practice that would ordinarily have taken months of planning and consultation were brought in instantly, operationalized within hours or days. In my role, I was part of the Faculty Executive Group working to respond quickly and strategically to protect the operations of the institution. In my role as HoD, I was supporting the department to make significant wholesale

changes to our practice whilst also offering individualized support to colleagues balancing an unprecedented sudden increase in workload whilst home-schooling their children. Indeed, I myself was balancing the responsibility whilst sharing the childcare of my two-year-old daughter. As previously discussed, this reconfigured how I presented my front self as I found my work and home lives blurring and I shared, retrospectively, the personal challenges I was facing with balancing childcare, work and the mental health impacts of being locked down.

I had, prior to the lockdown, planned to start working with a highly experienced professor who was supporting me with some strategic developments I planned for the department. The mentoring continued during the lockdown period and, whilst I did also continue to focus on the primary purpose of the mentoring relationship, I was also fortunate enough to have someone to support and advise me throughout. As with the previous mentoring and coaching I had received, I found a space to confide my anxieties, think through options and plan an approach. Having that space to privately share meant that, to the department, faculty and university, I appeared calm and in control, which consequently reassured the department. Privately, I did have periods where I felt overwhelmed by the pace of work, the pressure to take and implement decisions without time for consultation, and looking after my daughter full time alongside intense demands at work.

During the lockdown period, the university transitioned to a ‘block and blend’ approach that necessitated all academics to rewrite their materials into a blended learning model and into a six-week format from the previous twenty-four-week model we had in place. I was acutely aware of my role as the leader in the department and that, regardless of how I might feel about situations, I had to remain strong to maintain confidence in my leadership to drive the engagement required to implement the changes. The department responded incredibly. The collaboration that had grown through the team since the first meeting in September 2018 strengthened. We established buddy groups, platforms to share best practice, regular communications to teams and one-to-one meetings.

As the lockdown continued, the culture of collaboration and support became ever more important to each member of the team. I worked weekly with my mentor to continue strategic plans for the long-term future of the department, which I communicated as appropriate to instil a sense of normality amidst the unpredictability, but also planned continuously for the short term to prepare for the next stage of the crisis response. It was during this relatively calmer period that I started to recognize the importance of sharing my experiences with the department and openly acknowledging how difficult it had been at times. I can

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now see the value of navigating a line between being confident and reliable to the team but not hiding everything and showing a human side. This approach has resulted in a greater openness between the team and me as we've shared similar emotions and challenges. In addition, revealing a less polished version of me has taken the pressure off some of the team, who have told me they felt they were failing watching me appearing to manage the situation so easily. This second outcome and receiving this feedback has affected me profoundly as I saw my leadership through a different lens, whereby the confidence, organization and calmness could result in negative rather than positive outcomes for some members of the team. I have also been surprised by the reciprocal support and empathy I have received from the team who, rather than seeing this as a weakness and losing faith in me, have offered kindness and support to me. I feel that this sharing has enhanced my leadership and our team rather than undermining it.

As we initially returned to the campus, and the intensity of the training and material development response phase ended, I reflected on how we have responded as a department and can see that it has brought us all closer. The shared effort to respond, and clear framework and communications I was able to provide, have resulted in our team being even more collaborative and integrated than before.

As my career has progressed, I have increasingly adopted the role of mentor supporting colleagues across the sector in their academic journeys. I am aware of how beneficial mentoring relationships have been to my development and am keen to support others to have the same space to develop and reflect on their learning and future actions. Consistent with previous phases in my career, these relationships, which have emerged naturally rather than through formal agreement, can sometimes feel strange to me as I struggle to see myself as a role model to others. However, I do gain a significant amount of pride from being able to support colleagues through their academic journey and to see them succeed and overcome their own doubts. Increasingly, I can see that this part of my role and responsibility will expand, and I am keen to ensure that I have the necessary skills to provide the best possible mentoring. To this end, I have completed a qualification in leadership and management and engage in leadership development programmes that enhance my understanding of coaching and mentoring.

Conclusion

I have been in the HoD role for two and a half years and feel that in that time I have developed and evolved as a leader. I hope to continue to steer the department

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through the difficult external HE landscape and to put in place measures to protect the teaching and learning environment that has been developed through the programme review, working groups and other department initiatives. My leadership style has overall remained democratic, but I am comfortable to adopt different styles when the situation requires and would encourage others to see leadership as fluid.

Leadership in HE is challenging. We constantly juggle several competing priorities and support teams of academics who each have career aspirations and interests that, whilst overall have commonality, are incredibly individualized. As leaders, we must be able to provide the support that our team members need from us, but to achieve that, we need the time to reflect on our own journey and the space to manage our own internal conflicts, and I would encourage future leaders to create the space for personal reflection. In my career, mentoring has at every stage been pivotal, and I believe it would be a valuable source of support for other emerging and established leaders. I have grown as an individual and as a leader in HE; the space and time that has been granted to me through coaching and mentoring has been fundamental to my achievements. This will continue to play a central role in my future journey as I embed mentoring into the spaces I lead and cascade support to the future leaders in HE. The relationship between ‘front’ and ‘private’ self has been a dominant part of my leadership journey. As my confidence has grown, I have better understood the positive role vulnerability can play and would recommend that a controlled lowering of the ‘front self’ guard, supported by mentors, is helpful for leaders to be seen as authentic and to get people on board and help be part of the team and build relationships.

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