

## **To what extent do principals of further education colleges display similar leadership traits?**

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### **Abstract**

*Principals of further education colleges continue to operate in a policy context driven by reductions in funding, increasing diversity among the student population and escalating centralised control. This has meant that principals are required to rely more on their skills as decision makers and problem solvers than they have ever needed in the past. At the same time, external inspection has continued to highlight the importance of leadership in enabling students to achieve the best possible outcomes, yet as Fink (2010) argues the role of the principal is becoming increasingly unattractive. In order to combat a shortage of individuals pursuing principalship positions, organisations are developing their own leadership development programmes; however, little is known about the behaviours that these programmes should be developing. This paper reports the findings of a series of leadership and psychological assessments conducted with principals within the UK. It suggests that despite the organisational and political challenges facing institutions principals demonstrate a largely homogenous set of behaviours which could be used to frame future leadership development programmes.*

### **Keywords:**

Principalship, leadership development, leadership behaviours, community colleges

### **Introduction**

The election of the UK Conservative-led coalition government brought about systematic changes to the requirements to have 'qualified' staff within schools and further education colleges. No longer do teachers need to have a teaching qualification nor do further education college principals have to complete the Principals Qualifying Programme (PQP). The removal of these mandatory

requirements was part of the former Conservative-led coalition government's agenda to free education from the bureaucratic burden of centralised government control and as a result enabled institutions to recruit the most appropriate individual for the role, regardless of whether they held one of the aforementioned qualifications. The advantage of having freedom to appoint is shared by Thorne and Pellant (2007) who argue that organisations should hire for attitude and train for whatever. The previous requirement to hold PQP was for some a barrier to progression to principalship at a time when the number of candidates pursuing the 'top job' within colleges had significantly reduced (Frearson, 2003; Clancy, 2005; Collinson and Collinson, 2006; Giese et al., 2009; LLUK, 2011). This is further compounded by an increasing trend in senior staff being removed from their posts as a result of failing standards (Lepkowska, 2014; Lightman, 2014).

To help combat this shortfall in suitably skilled and experienced candidates for principalship, Kambil (2010) argues that current post-holders have a moral responsibility to develop their staff; however, Lambert (2014) found that principals often mistook this to mean their deputies rather than the staff of the college. Saying that, Davies and Davies (2011) argue that in order to develop staff the current principal needs to display the leadership qualities that they wish to develop in others. In order for institutions to develop the next generation of education leaders, a knowledge of what behaviours need to be developed is required. This article reports on findings of a study to consider the question of:

- the extent to which UK further education college principals, in the sample group, display similar behaviours?

To achieve this, the paper first discusses progression into leadership in the context of developing future leaders of education and why a strategic approach is needed. Following that, the paper moves on to present and discuss the data from six quantitative assessments, each one assessing a different behaviour (such as leadership style, ability to recognise emotions, interdependent accepts of critical thinking) conducted with principals of general further education colleges in the South-East of England during the latter part of 2014 and throughout 2015. The data presents an observation of behaviours that are present in current principals; however, it is up to individual institutions to ascertain whether these behaviours are prerequisites for future leaders of education or desirable behaviours that leaders should process.

There are, however, practical applications of understanding the behaviours of leadership. Wells (2013) suggests that a 90% reduction in negative behaviours was experienced in their study simply through individuals recognising their own behaviours. Yet, this is more than a process of self-reflection; by understanding the leadership behaviours of principals, institutions can frame their own leadership development programmes in a way that develops individuals who aspire to become the future leaders of education. By using this knowledge individuals with responsibility for developing future leaders can ensure that they are developing staff with the behaviours necessary to lead education. It may be that the behaviours identified in this paper are not the behaviours that are needed for the future of leadership in education, but that judgement cannot be made without having the finding from this paper available. It is important to acknowledge that this paper is focusing on one category of college (general further education) under the umbrella term of further education. Indeed, it might be that the behaviours identified in this paper are only representative of those individuals in general further education

colleges, under normal situations, and that different behaviours or levels of behaviours are witnessed under abnormal operating conditions or within different categories of college. Therefore, this paper attempts to add to the discourse on leadership within further education by exploring the behaviours that further education college principal's display.

### **The identification of future leaders**

The role of the principal has evolved significantly as a result of incorporation of colleges out of local government control back in 1992 into having two distinct aspects to their role. College principals are the custodians of academic standards while balancing the often conflicting role of being the business leader, responsible for the livelihoods of hundreds of staff and for millions of pounds of public money. This is typically reflected in the job titles which are commonly Principal and Chief Executive. This change in phenomenon increasingly points to a new and more demanding leadership approach by which today's principals need to operate, a form of leadership in which senior post holders act as change agents with the responsibility for enhancing learning and driving self-improvement (O'Gorman and Hard, 2013). At the same time, principals are increasingly being held accountable for institutional performance in outcome-based measures, such as examination results or destination measures (Giese et. al., 2009). The UK inspection agency, Ofsted, acknowledges and continues to articulate the relationship between leadership and outcomes for young people (Ofsted, 2006 & 2011). This view is shared by Burgoyne, Hirsh and Williams (2004) who suggest that organisational performance is affected by the quality of leadership. However, the increased focus for principals on accountability is just one aspect of the role at a time when the further education sector is facing continued

reductions in funding as a result of austerity measures introduced by the former Conservative-led coalition government and continued by the current Conservative government. Meanwhile escalating centralised regulation introduced to enable the state government to maintain an element of control over colleges as quasi-autonomous institutions, have all taken their toll on the expectations of the principal. In the current environment, senior leaders in colleges must rely more on their abilities and skills as decision makers and problem solvers than they have ever needed to in the past. It is not just the lack of suitably skilled and experienced individuals that need to be resolved, but also how to make the post of principal attractive. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) suggest that increases in job stress, inadequate levels of funding and an increasingly diverse student population are all contributing to a lack of individuals seeking out principalship opportunities. Fink (2010), however, argues that the shortage of individuals pursuing senior leadership positions is due to the current generation valuing family life over work and their desire to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Despite the role becoming seemingly less attractive, many colleges have adopted a succession planning strategy, but as Davies and Davies (2011) argue this is rarely sufficient and institutions need to be considering a talent identification and management programme to ensure that potential leaders are identified and supported from early on in their careers. In order for this to be successful, there needs to be a clearly defined structure of leadership roles which grow in responsibility and impact, and organisations need to ensure that there is a steady flow of people who are ready to move into different leadership positions as the opportunities arise. There are, however, several debatable issues which institutions need addressing. First, whether talent development is restricted to a small number of individuals or open to all staff. Second, the transparency of the assessment methods used to identify staff to

participate in a focused programme of development and, third, whether there are any issues around equality of opportunity if institutions are restricting the programme to a limited few individuals.

Giese et. al. (2009) suggest that overall leadership practices appear to be common to decision makers. So, the extent to which the skills necessary to be a principal are homogeneous, could be used to frame a development programme aimed at those individuals who wish to become future leaders of education? Indeed, principals themselves have identified a number of behaviours which they consider important. These include but are not limited to self-awareness; self-belief; and emotional intelligence. While these behaviours are considered by current principals to be important they do not explain the progression into leadership positions. Bhatti et al., (2012) found that there are three basic ways to explain how individuals became leaders:

1. Personalities that naturally lead individuals into leadership roles.
2. As a result of a crisis or important event which causes an individual to rise to the occasion.
3. People choose to become leaders and learn leadership skills.

Within further education, leaders typically identify themselves as 'accidental leaders' who never set out to become leaders, but as a result of experiencing leadership consciously choose to pursue leadership opportunities more actively. Associated with each of Bhatti et al.'s, (2012) explanations is a set of leadership styles and patterns of behaviour which underpin the way in which individuals function in various situations. These are commonly referred to as Autocratic, Democratic or Laissez-Faire (Delegative) and while a longstanding assumption is that democratic leadership is the

most effective (Lewin et al., 1939), both Smith and Peterson (1988) and Bhatti et al., (2012) argue that the effectiveness of a leader is dependent on the criterion being used to assess leadership. Yuan et al., (2005) and Voon et al., (2011) both found that an individual's leadership style influences those that they lead. These individuals need to be able to lead highly effective teams through the maintaining of positive working relationship with their staff. However, Nanjundeswaraswamy and Swamy (2014) suggest that as a result of a vastly complex and rapidly changing environment organisations increasingly need effective leaders. Regardless of the approach to leadership adopted by an individual, the absence of a leadership style creates an environment with a lack of direction and employees with low morale and a lack of interest in work.

### **Methodology**

Fifteen general further education college principals (*mean* age 51.8 years; 5 female, 10 male) who were self-selected through convenience sampling (Plowright, 2011), in order to take part in the study. Participants came from a range of organisations (see Table 1) of different sizes, based on Payne's (2008) classification of colleges by income and Ofsted grade (the UK national quality inspection agency). The colleges from which participants were selected are classified as 'General Further Education', institutions that provide education to young people aged sixteen and over, on a variety of courses from entry level (K10 equivalent) to sub-degree level in a variety of occupational areas, both academic and vocational. It is worth noting at this point that further education is an umbrella term for a range of post-compulsory education and training providers, excluding higher education.

College	Principal	Ofsted Grade <sup>1</sup>	Size <sup>2</sup>
College 1	Male	2	Small
College 2	Female	2	Small
College 3	Male	2	Small
College 4	Female	2	Medium
College 5	Female	1	Large
College 6	Male	2	Small
College 7	Male	4	Small
College 8	Female	1	Medium
College 9	Male	2	Medium
College 10	Male	2	Small
College 11	Male	4	Small
College 12	Male	2	Medium
College 13	Male	1	Small
College 14	Male	1	Medium
College 15	Female	2	Large

Table 1: Contextual data of 15 participating colleges

Principals in the study were not selected based on being ‘excellent’ due to the subjectiveness of what excellence means. McBer’s (2000) study sought to compare the strengths and weaknesses of educational leadership with senior business executives through the selection of 36 ‘outstanding leaders’ but could only do this by using data available on their institution’s website. This, at best, renders the data unreliable and potentially fundamentally flawed. Unlike McBer’s (2000) study, participants in this research were not identified to participate based on undefined notions of outstanding or excellence. This ensures that the behaviours identified in participants are a more realistic representation of the current state of principalship.

The sample group undertook a series of activities commencing with an in-depth interview based on Bottery et al.’s, (2009) portrait methodology which uses open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews, which attempt to capture the thoughts,

<sup>1</sup> Ofsted inspection grades – 1, Outstanding; 2, Good; 3, Requires Improvement and 4, inadequate.

<sup>2</sup> Payne’s (2008) classification of colleges by income per annum. Small college less than £14m, Medium £14-29m, Large over £29 million pounds



feelings and self-reflections of individuals in particular contexts at a moment in time. This paper, however, reports only on the findings of the tasks described below and not the portrait questions which looked at the decisions influencing an individual's journey to principalship.

Participants also undertook a series of tasks as listed in Table 2:

Test	Purpose
Belbin Team Role Questionnaire	Focuses on preferred role within a team
Leadership Styles Survey	Assesses dominant and sub-dominant leadership styles
Transactional Analysis Survey	Classifies an individual's personality
Life Orientation (LIFO) Survey	Identifies behavioural strengths and weaknesses under normal and abnormal circumstances
Geneva Emotional Recognition Test (GERT)	Measures an individual's emotion recognition ability
Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Assessment	Measures different interdependent aspects of critical thinking

Table 2: Summary of the 6 assessments used with participants and the purpose of the test.

With the exception of the LIFO, the GERT assessment and the Watson-Glaser assessment all of the aforementioned assessments are commonly available and used in leadership development programmes. It could be argued whether these tests are the most effective for measuring leadership behaviours, although the range of tests used provides a multi-dimensional approach to leadership.

The McBer (2000) study used tests which identified leadership styles, albeit, they only looked at it under 'normal' situations and tests associated with thinking skills. This paper is, however, reporting the findings using comparable tests to McBer (2000) plus additional tests which will provide a greater richness of data. All of the tests are designed to look at behaviours rather than competencies, which is what Thorne and Pellant (2007) argue. What these assessments are seeking to do is identify 'drivers' which are strong indicators of how the participants behave in the workplace and by

being aware of them individuals can, if necessary, begin to respond and work with them.

Assessing the dispositions of current or prospective employees is important in a workplace setting, particularly in the context of organisational development, talent identification and succession planning. Artistic and Rothenberg (2013) suggest that employers view an individual's dispositions as a diagnostic tool because of the predictive value on how an individual may perform. The challenge for educational institutions and particularly those involved in the development of senior leaders is to determine whether the behaviours that are presented in this paper are those that are actually needed to guide further education through the constantly shifting landscape.

It is important to note that this paper is not producing a continuum of leadership competency associated with the identified behaviours. It would also be inappropriate to suggest that if an individual scored a certain level on the tests, there would be a correlation in the leadership performance. The sample size is far too small to be able to make such a claim, and job-related performance, as well as success, are purely subjective and unique to an individual and institution.

### **The mapping of leadership behaviours**

#### *Geneva Emotional Recognition Test (GERT)*

Emotional recognition has been identified by serving principals as a key attribute deemed necessary for future leaders of education. This is not a new idea, as the ability of an individual to perceive emotions may be particularly important for the performance of individuals and teams. Rubin, Munz and Bommer (2005) identified four skill dimensions to emotions in leadership: perceiving emotions (i.e. the ability to

identify emotions in faces, pictures and sounds), facilitating through emotions (i.e. the ability to harness emotions in one's thinking), understanding emotions (i.e. the ability to comprehend emotional information) and managing emotions (i.e. the ability to manage emotions for personal and interpersonal growth). Given that leadership primarily involves working with teams and individuals at all levels of the organisational hierarchy, it is easy to see the importance of emotional recognition in leadership. Prati et. al., (2003) support the importance of emotional recognition by stating that emotionally intelligent leaders will induce the collective motivations of teams which will ultimately improve performance. However, Anotonakis (2003) warns that viewing emotional recognition as a panacea alone may be premature. This paper supports the use of emotional recognition, but only as part of a suite of measures available to inform the development of future leaders and indeed using any one method is likely to lead to a deficit in the ability of those tasked with leading education in the future.

The Geneva Emotional Recognition Test (GERT) uses dynamic, multimodal emotion expressions (in the form of short video clips with sound) in order to measure an individual's emotion recognition ability (Schlegel et al., 2014). Unlike other emotional recognition tests (ERTs) which commonly use either 5 (Scherer and Scherer, 2011), 7 (Matsumoto et al., 2000) or 10 (Bänziger, Grandjean and Scherer, 2009) emotions, the GERT system uses 14 emotions affording greater flexibility in emotion selection than classical test theory. This reduces the chances of consistency motif whereby a consistency propensity between participants is sought (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

From those undertaking the emotional recognition assessment, Figure 1 shows that almost half of the participants ( $n=7$ ) scored below 60%. The average scoring being 62%, but this was skewed by two participants scoring over 70% (72% and 75%). The range of scores was from 49% to 75%, with the average (mean) female participant scores of 59% and an average (mean) male participant score of 64%; a variation of +5%. These scores need to be put in the context of a mean average of 67% (denoted by the solid red line in Figure 1) from a sample of 295 participants selected from members of public (Schlegel, Grandjean and Scherer, 2014). Although the results are from a limited sample, they do suggest that there isn't such a large gender gap in emotional recognition than previously thought.

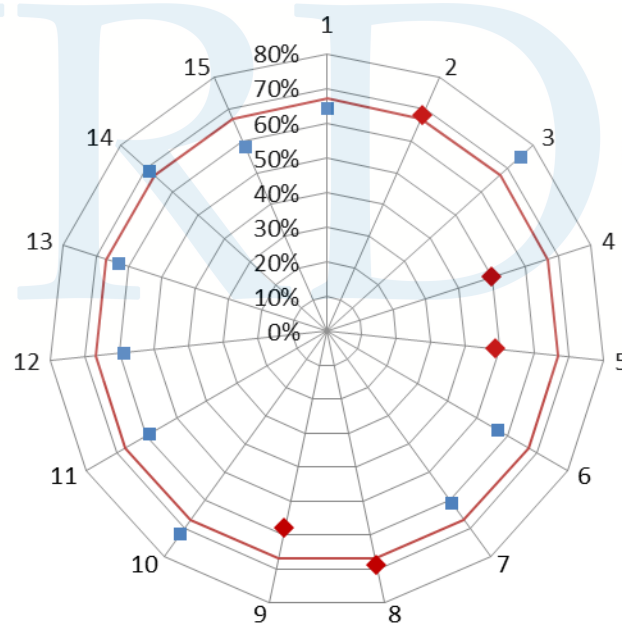


Figure 1: GERT results – numbers 1 to 15 represents the actual score of each principal. The blue square denotes the scores of male participants, while the red diamond, female.

Fernández-Berrocal et al., (2012) suggest that the gender difference in emotional recognition is as a result of women receiving an education bias towards emotions, yet

given that the core function of education revolves around people, it could be suggested that there is a levelling of these differences between the genders. Taking the idea that the area of the brain responsible for processing emotions is generally larger in females, due to the educational bias, it could be inferred that the +5% variation is a result of the brain's plasticity, implying that it could be possible to develop new behaviours. Nevertheless, it is important to state that these results alone are insufficient to make any assumptions or generalisations in relation to possible differences based on gender.

#### *Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking*

Given the reliance that senior leaders must place on their abilities and skills as decision makers and problem solvers, the Watson-Glaser critical thinking assessment seeks to measure different interdependent aspects of critical thinking through its subsets of inference, recognition of assumptions, deduction, interpretation, and evaluation of arguments (Hassan and Madhum, 2007). These were independently scored to avoid what Podsakoff et al., (2003) calls leniency bias.

Figure 2 illustrates that with the exception of two participants who scored over 70% (72% and 82%), the others were all below 60% with nearly half of all participants ( $n=7$ ) scoring below 20%, with the average score being 37%, which is below the average for all public sector leaders in the comparison group which is 58%. Females scored better than males in this task, averaging 45% compared to 33% for male participants. The findings do illustrate a significant variation in the range of scores recorded, with the lowest being 5%, which is 53% lower than the average than the comparison group (58%), while the maximum score was 82%, 29% higher than the

same comparison group. What this paper cannot claim based on these results alone is the extent to which female leaders are more astute when making decisions. But it does raise the question as to whether more needs to be done to develop critical analysis skills in aspiring leaders. Interestingly, there was no correlation between the test score and age which might suggest that the ability to think critically is not age dependent.

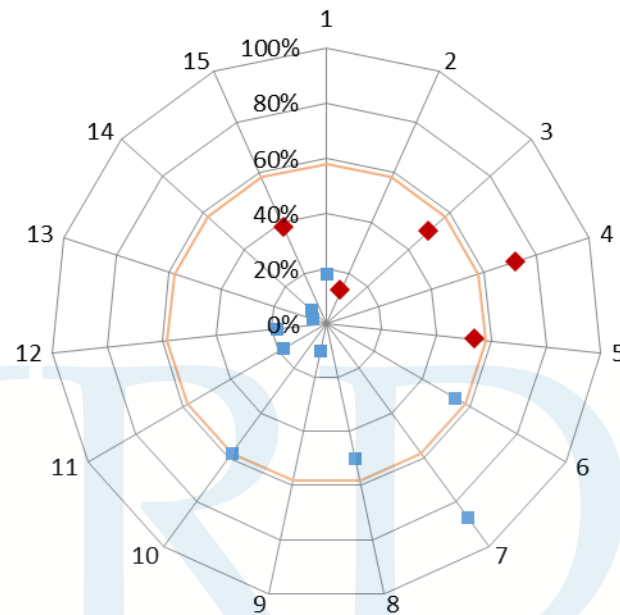


Figure 2: Watson-Glaser results – numbers 1 to 15 represents the scores of each principal. The blue square denotes the scores of male participants, the red diamond, female.

The test scores suggest that there is a difference but it is whether these differences are to be considered significant. What needs to be considered is that critical thinking encompasses a variety of thinking skills which mesh together. These skills include mathematical, scientific, historical, anthropological, economic, moral and philosophical thinking. What this illustrates is that critical thinking does not focus on any one area of thinking where one gender is expected to do better than others. Hassan and Madhum (2007) suggest that the lack of gender difference in critical

thinking assessments is often a product of the experiences or education that individuals receive. This could be true of the sample group, as a majority of them have been involved in educational leadership in one form or another for many years, which would shape the experiences and inform their levels of critical thinking. However, given the relatively low scores compared to the comparison group, could there be an inference that educational leaders do not engage in critical thinking to the same extent as their public sector counterparts? A fact borne out by McBer (2000) which found that private sector executives in their study scored higher at critical thinking than educational leaders, finding it easier to clarify complex issues and situations using unifying concepts and models (pg 10).

#### *LIFO assessment*

The Lifo psychometric assessment (Atkins and Katcher, 1967) aims to assess an individual's behavioural strengths and weaknesses under normal and less desirable situations. Strengths are categorised as: *Supporting*, characterised through encouraging collaboration, inspiring and trusting individuals and a commitment to shared values; *conserving*, distinguishable through the adoption of a reflective approach to leadership – studying a situation, reviewing what's involved prior to deciding on any actions and ensuring the relevance of the actions to the organisation's goals; *adapting* involves getting a consensus and inviting individuals to take on tasks and responsibilities while offering frequent positive reinforcement to motivate staff; *controlling* which is more autocratic than other styles and focuses on telling others what to achieve, pressing for higher levels of achievement, decisive decision making, rewarding success and pointing out shortcomings in performance. The weaknesses

that the assessment highlights are when the strengths become excessive and become detrimental to an individual and their performance, rather a deficiency of skills.

Given that the function of further education is supporting and developing young people to acquire the skills which will enable them to progress into higher education or employment it is, therefore, unsurprising that 86.7% of participants ( $n=13$ ) scored highest in the *Supporting* strength (averaging 29.3 out of a maximum of 36 points). 13.3% of participants ( $n=2$ ) scored either *Adapting* or *Conserving* the highest. None of the participants scored *Controlling* as their highest strength, although 20% ( $n=3$ ) scored this as their second highest. Further analysis of the three participants who scored *Controlling* as their second highest strength, reveals a small difference, 4.2 points, between the controlling score and their highest. This maybe as a result of external factors which at the time required a more directive approach to leadership. A fact which was borne out in the interview, where one institution was embarking on a merger requiring very clear leadership in order to secure the long-term future of the college, while another, an institution with a large number of young people with significant complex cognitive and physical needs, and a college whose principal was a recently retired senior ex-military officer. A point which is reinforced by Davies and Davies (2011) who state that individuals pick up the leadership behaviours that they observe in others.

Under less desirable situations there is a more diverse pattern among participants. Only 13.3% of participants ( $n=2$ ) scored supporting as their highest score under stressful circumstances. They also scored supporting as their highest score under normal circumstances which suggests an element of consistency of leadership approach. 53.3% of participants ( $n=8$ ) became more reflective in their approach to



leadership, categorised through the Conserving dimension becoming the highest score, while 20% ( $n=3$ ) scored Adapting as their highest, where they were seeking that consensus around decisions and a way forward, while 13.3% ( $n=2$ ) scored Controlling as their highest under less desirable circumstances.

These findings were consistent with those from the leadership assessment which through a series of 30 questions sought to categorise participants' leadership style as democratic, akin to *Supporting*; delegative which is affiliated to *Adapting* in the aforementioned; or authoritarian, aligned to *Controlling* (Lewin, Lippit and White (1939). All participants were identified as being democratic in their primary approach to leadership, scoring on average 42.46 out of a maximum of 50 points. Their secondary style of leadership was delegative, scoring an average of 31.2 out of 50, 11.26 points less than the primary style. Finally, the autocratic approach to leadership was the least dominant style, ranking bottom in 93.3% of participants ( $n=14$ ), scoring only 22.67 out of a possible 50 points, 19.87 points lower than the average for the most dominant style of leadership.

#### *Transactional Analysis*

The transactional analysis survey identifies behaviours, attitudes, feelings and language that form the complex interpersonal transactions associated with personalities under one of three ego states: Parent, Adult or Child (Phillips, 2005). The parenting aspect is filled with judgements, values and attitudes with a strong moral focus on what is right and wrong. On the other hand, the adult state is principally concerned with transforming stimuli into pieces of information predicated

on a logical or rational approach to connecting it with reality. The child state has been further subdivided into rebellious child and adaptive child which represent a compliance with expectations or norms, whereas the rebellious child represents a playful and spontaneous aspect of personality. From the principals participating in this study, 73.33% ( $n=11$ ) scored Adult as their dominant ego-state, reflecting the objective nature of running a multi-million-pound organisation and the current economic challenges of successive funding cuts. However, out of those scoring Adult as their dominate ego-state, 81.82% ( $n=9$ ) scored Parent as their second highest ego-state, while 26.67% of participants ( $n=4$ ) scored Parent as their dominant ego-state. This could reflect education's notion of *loco-parentis* and the nurturing role that further education colleges have in developing young people. The prominence of the parent ego-state across all participants correlates with the supportive dimension of the LIFO survey and the ethos of further education. This combination of adult and parent could be representative of the two distinct functions of the principal and chief executive role. The principal aspect being represented by the high parent score which aligns to the academic responsibilities whereas the adult score being representative of the objective business focused chief executive.

#### *Belbin team roles*

The Belbin team role questionnaire is one of the most influential theories on team composition and performance available (Batenbury, Wouter, and Wesley, 2013). Belbin's (1993, 2010) research revealed that the difference between successful and unsuccessful teams was not dependent on factors such as intellect and experience but primarily on behaviour, the way team members make decisions, interact with one another and apply their capabilities to reach the team result. Belbin (1993) came up

with nine roles and like the other assessments, an excess of the behaviours can lead to weaknesses. The nine behaviours are listed in Table 3:

Belbin Team Role	Summary
Plants	highly creative and good at solving problems in unconventional ways, but in excess could be unorthodox or forgetful
Resource Investigators	make sure that the team's idea would translate to the world outside the team; however; they might forget to follow up on a lead
Monitor Evaluators	provide a logical eye, making impartial judgements where required and to weigh up the team's options in a dispassionate way, but could be overly critical and slow moving
Co-ordinators	focus on the team's objectives and delegate work appropriately, but might over delegate leaving themselves little work to do
Implementers	plan a practical, workable strategy and carry it out as efficiently as possible, but they might be slow to relinquish their plans in favour of positive changes
Completer Finishers	scrutinise the work for errors, subjecting it to the highest standards of quality control but they could be accused of taking their perfectionism to the extremes
Team workers	help the team to gel, using their versatility to identify the work required, although they might become indecisive when unpopular decisions need to be made
Shapers	provide the necessary drive to ensure that the team kept moving and do not lose focus or momentum, but they could risk becoming aggressive and bad-humoured in their attempts to get things done
Specialist	have in-depth knowledge of a key area but may have a tendency to focus narrowly on their own subject of choice

Table 3: Summary of Belbin's (1993) team roles

The findings of the Belbin assessment highlight that coordinator (with 33.3%,  $n=5$ ) and shaper (33.3%,  $n=5$ ) were the most common team roles, with the resource

investigator and plant scoring 13.33% ( $n=2$ ), while monitor/evaluator scored 6.67% ( $n=1$ ). It is questionable whether any generalisations could be made due to the size of the sample group and the sparsity of the scores across the nine categories. It could be suggested that having a focus on a team's objectives and delegating work appropriately and ensuring necessary drive to keep the momentum going, as described by the coordinator and resource roles, relates to delegative leadership style previously mentioned. What is evidence is that unlike other tests, there is not a single dominant role that is played by individuals. However, the frequency of the participants scoring coordinator ( $n=5$ ) and shaper ( $n=5$ ) are both related to leading and motivating teams. The sample group is too small to determine whether this is an anomaly or representative and more importantly whether it impact on leadership? In terms of practicalities, one could argue that senior leadership teams need to have the correct balance of behaviours in order for them to be effective. However, these important questions are outside of the scope of this particular paper, but they do need addressing.

### *Summary*

As a result of the assessments undertaken and the consistency of a majority of the findings it could be proposed that principals illustrate the following behaviours (see Table 4):

Assessment	Outcome
Geneva Emotional Recognition Test (GERT)	Average 61%
Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking (WG-CT)	Average 50%
LIFO	Supporting

Leadership Assessment	Democratic
Transactional Analysis (TA)	Adult/Parent
Belbin Team roles	Coordinator/Shaper

Table 4: Summary of Leadership Behaviours based on the 15 participants

This is not to say that these behaviours are fixed but it does strike an interesting chord with participants within the study, acknowledging the size of the sample group and that all participants came from the same category of institution (general further education), albeit of different sizes and socio-economic contexts. As a minimum, it could be suggested that by principals recognising their own strengths and weaknesses they are more able to mitigate the negative impact of these on their teams. Barrick and Mount (1991); Jackson et al., (2010) and Moon (2001) have all argued that individuals who routinely demonstrated a high level of a particular trait conscientiousness are better workers than those who do not. However, this needs to be countered by ensuring that senior leadership teams are balanced and that the attributes which are demonstrated by the principal are complementary with those of other senior staff.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the extent to which principals of further education colleges display similar leadership behaviours. The paper did this by exploring leadership through a conceptual lens of developing future leaders, after which it presented data obtained through a series of assessments on a sample group of

further education college principals in the UK. It is important to note that the paper was not looking at the behaviours of specific groups of leaders, for example, excellent leaders or underperforming leaders, as there is a lack of a widely accepted definition as to whether these categories of leaders exist. As such the findings in this paper do not provide a menu of outstanding leadership behaviours, but, instead, they suggest that, within the sample group, principals do display a largely homogeneous set of behaviours; which raises some interesting questions for future research. For example, to what extent do the tests and the language used constrict the possible range of outcomes? This is partly addressed through the use of norm data like in the Geneva Emotional Recognition Test (GERT) and the Watson-Glaser critical thinking test. Also, are these behaviours appropriate for leaders in the rapidly changing nature of the further education sector? If not, then what skills and behaviours should college principals possess and how should they be developed? Bass and Bass (2008) suggest that behaviours cannot be learned rather they are inherited and that leadership and leaders are born and not made. Cherry (2010) also argues that behaviours are fixed psychological structures which limit the value of trying to teach or develop them in staff. This notion of fixed behaviours underpinning leadership is important as the manifestation of them can be witnessed in an individual's approach to leadership. For example, Culey (2012) suggests that those with a fixed mindset will not challenge their abilities due to preconceived views of themselves and will expend their energies on defending their positions and paradigms. The issue for educational leaders who hold this mindset is that there is a potential for them to adopt a culture of blame, not necessarily internally within the organisation, but externally to factors beyond their control such as funding policy. Their efforts are then directed to demonstrating why remedial actions will not work in order to maintain the status quo. It is this notion of

maintenance which is often recognised as management rather than leadership. Contrary to this, is Dweck (2010) who suggests that the brain is malleable and plasticity enables individuals to develop new behaviours. This is evident in studies that have shown that the hippocampi region of the brain can be developed in response to the acquisition of new knowledge (Maguire et al., 2000; Sharot, 2012). In contrast to the fixed mindset of leadership, people adopting a growth mindset approach focus on constant improvement, both individually and organisationally. When presented with a challenge rather than acting as a victim, they embrace the opportunity to raise their game without fear of failure. This links back to Bhatti et al.'s, (2012) ideas that individuals progress into leadership as a result of needing to 'rise to the occasion' (pg. 192). This desire for improvement reinforces O'Gorman and Hard (2013) and Parker's (2015) idea of leadership. Independent of political or economic influences it is important for individuals to recognise their own approach to leadership, as either fixed or growth. If one presupposes that principals adopt a growth mindset, then existing behaviours and behaviours can be developed through a process of awareness, rehearsal and reflection in order to model the behaviours which are desirable in others; reinforcing Davies and Davies (2011) ideas around modelling leadership qualities as a mechanism to develop future leaders. However, the question remains and it is one that is beyond the scope of if this paper, as the extent that successive government policies and initiatives are actually eroding the idea of a growth mindset of leadership and the priority for principals is around maintenance so that the organisation remains solvent for those staff whose livelihood is dependent on it. Yet, as a result of the shifting policy landscape that surrounds further education, does the sector attract a certain 'type' of individual to principalship or are current notions of principalship simply a product of the further education sector. More importantly,

could these findings be used to frame and support the development of those wishing to pursue leadership positions within the sector and if so, how is this achieved in a time of austerity? For example, based on the relatively low scores of the Watson-Glaser critical thinking assessment where the average for the participant group was 37% compared to an average for public sector leaders of 58%, should more be done to develop the critical thinking skills of leaders? With the pressures associated with further education such as financial constraints, accountability and escalating regulation, individuals need the ability to systematically and habitually impose criteria and intellectual standards upon their thoughts. These may include being outcome driven, open to new and innovative ideas, being a risk taker, persistent and creative; although this is not a definitive list, Popil (2011) suggests that thinking should be driven by a students' needs. Likewise, findings from the Belbin (1993) survey suggest an inconsistency among participants, so should more thought be given to the constitution of the senior leadership team to ensure a balance of skills and not an over dominance of a particular Belbin function?

Given the responsibility associated with the post of principal, is it incumbent on current leaders to ensure that those pursuing leadership positions are adequately equipped for the post to which they aspire? Otherwise, there is an inherent risk that recruiting panels may be tempted to appoint the best candidate on the day rather than the best candidate for the role. In order to avoid this should further support be provided to recruiting panels as they are responsible for the robustness and equity of the process? Given the infrequency of recruiting a college principal and the limited time that panels have with potential candidates (often only a day or two), is an interview alone sufficient to inform their decision? Undoubtedly, the interview



element of the selection process must carry the highest weighting of all the methods used, as it provides a valuable insight into an individual's experience, and as such, this paper is not advocating a move away from that, rather, that trait-based assessments have a key role to play in informing a selection panel's decision. Despite the positives of using such tools in recruitment and development individual and reducing attrition (Melamed and Jackson, 1995; Piotrowski and Armstrong, 2006; Wells, 2013) the limits of such tools must be acknowledged. Testing candidates can be a good indicator of behaviour (Van der Merwe, 2002) and compared to interviews alone are considerably more reliable (Van der Walt, 1998). Brittain (2014), however, highlights how the over-reliance on such tests can lead to business failure, particularly through the misplaced over-interpretation of test scores and the assumption that high scores indicate future success.

#### Further research

These findings support the discourse around whether current orthodoxies framing leadership and leadership development need to be reviewed. In particular as a result of the adoption of managerial ideologies which has created the need for a new form of college leader. These new leaders need to be able to balance the pressures of improving academic standards with the business requirements of leading multi-million organisations while navigating the constantly shifting sands of state policy. With the prospect of continued reductions in funding for further education, a greater emphasis is going to be placed on the abilities of principals to lead their colleges through the forthcoming challenges while remaining true to the purpose of further education. Could it be that there should be a debate around the disaggregation of the current principal and chief executive role, in order to ensure that institutions can

appoint individuals with the behaviours and appropriate skills and knowledge to steer colleges through the political landscape while maintaining academic standards? It is not to say that the behaviours of current principals are not valid or appropriate, or indeed that current principals are unable to lead colleges, but with little sign that the aforementioned challenges around funding and political interference are going to reduce in the future, colleges and those leading them, need to be developing the leadership pipeline. This paper is not suggesting that there is a Holy Grail to identifying future college principals; instead, that further research and debate is needed into leadership identification and development in further education in order for colleges to be in the best position possible to recruit individuals who are able to secure the long-term future of further education.

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