

Reflections on leading and managing a large educational project
Trudie E. Roberts
Director, Assessment and Learning in Practice Settings (ALPS) CETL

Nearly 7 years ago now I was sitting in an unremarkable station café in a major city in the northeast waiting for a non-existent connection; to pass the time I took out of my bag the information on the new HEFCE call for bids for Centres of Excellence in Learning and Teaching (later changed to Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) presumably so as to dissociate them from anything to do with the devolved areas of the UK thereby destroying a perfectly good acronym). Little did I think that this simple act was one that would change my work, my life and my point of view. No fanfare occurred, no sudden illumination, no image became discernable in the piece of toast I was eating, even the coffee remained an unchanged greyish colour in fact no clues at all. Yet being part of the successful bid by the consortium of five higher education institutions in West Yorkshire has been changing in so many ways. As a consequence of this rather unique experience and particularly now that the CETL programme is coming to an end I wanted to produce a reflective piece on what I have learned during my time as Director of the ALPS CETL, the mistakes I have made and the lessons I could pass on. In doing so I hope that this essay might be of some use to others who are thinking about embarking on a similar project and also of interest to those others who shared some or all of this journey. Those looking for a manual for leading successful multi-institutional projects will be disappointed; there are many of these written by those far better qualified full of business management theory and replete with endless algorithms. No, this piece is meant simply to share some of my thoughts and musings as I reflect back over the previous five years, written by strange coincidence whilst again waiting for a delayed rail connection in the northeast of England.

The first and probably most crucial thing that strikes me is the importance of building trust probably in any relationship but particularly important when dealing with people from different, often competing, institutions and essential when those individuals come primarily from a health and social care background. If you want to see the worst type of tribalism, often presented as collegiality, then look no further than the health professions. Trust is not a fashionable concept these days particularly with the emergence of the concept of accountability however without the trust that we built up within the CETL I believe we could not have achieved our goals. Building trust between partners, between colleagues, between individuals and groups does not happen by serendipity it needs to be an acknowledged goal with activities to support its development and continued maintenance. It is a very precious commodity and once lost or damaged is very difficult to get back. Treat it with the respect it deserves and value it as the most crucial ingredient for success of your project. It seems to me that the main building blocks of trust are honesty and integrity overlaid with a capacity to listen and if necessary change one's point of view after hearing persuasive counter arguments. Some leaders feel that to change their opinion shows weakness; I disagree. This is borne from the painful recognition that often when I have taken a poor decision it has been because I have not listened to all the arguments dispassionately and have instead adopted a

particular stand point subsequently garnering biased evidence to support that position. Consequently I would encourage leaders to be open to new and different points of view and indeed actively seek the opinion and input from individuals who look at the world differently. If you choose to surround yourself with colleagues who think as you do you will learn nothing and not continue your own development. The opportunity that a large multi-layer project offers to work with different groups of people is an exciting opportunity don't miss out on it.

Other essential factors in building trust are communication, consultation and explanation for decisions and actions. Over time I have been given two insights into life which have proved invaluable. The first is, 'there are multiple realities' and secondly, 'only fiction needs to make sense real life is not bounded by this rule'. Consequently ensure that you are keeping everyone in the loop and even when you have to make urgent decisions where there may not be time to consult widely furnishing all your collaborators with your decisions and reasons for them will be appreciated. Having come from a generation and a professional background steeped in the maxim –'never complain, never explain' – I have found this particularly hard but I have been fortunate in the support I have had from my core team and other key colleagues. The understanding and commitment they have shown at times of difficulty and stress has been key in my leadership development.

Which brings me to my final point. I firmly believe it is the responsibility of all leaders to develop a nurturing creative environment where talented individuals will flourish. One of the greatest pleasures of working with high achieving and ambitious colleagues is being able to encourage individuals to develop and thrive. My major criticism of the English university system is the apparent hierarchy and pigeon-holing which exists and because of this I fear many opportunities are lost. You need to be constantly on the look out for individuals who are innovative and creative and you will often find them in roles that do not allow their talents to develop. Be bold, provide such people with the opportunity to blossom they will pay you back a hundred fold and take pride and pleasure in their development and achievements.

Perhaps almost as a postscript I must mention the need to ensure you enjoy yourself along the way in this role; it is after all the journey to Ithaca that is probably more important than the arrival itself and speaking of journeys that could just be my delayed connection.....