

UCL RESEARCH DEPARTMENT OF CLINICAL, EDUCATIONAL AND HEALTH PSYCHOLOGY
Educational Psychology Group

Memo: To all Year 2 and Year 3 trainee EPs at UEL and UCL from Roger Booker

Date: 26.05.14

Trainee EP views of Psychological Service Leadership

You were recently requested to complete a questionnaire on your service leadership. This is a feedback paper to you all following a keynote address to the National Association of PEPs at their Annual Conference on 13th May. The results of the survey comprised a substantial section of my presentation.

So – firstly my thanks to those of you who responded at a particularly demanding time on your courses. I received a 75% response (32 proformas returned) which enabled me to report the findings as being representative of the trainee perspective on leadership, at least in London and the southeast of England.

As you might imagine, the findings were of considerable interest to this particular gathering. I emphasised that they were not primarily a critique of present leadership, but rather a view from a specific group who nevertheless represented the “millennial generation” with patterns of relationships and communication which made them distinct from previous generations – principally through a fluent use of technology (see Balda, 2011 for further discussion). The questions were, however, derived from current wider theories of leadership (see Booker, 2013) so there was some element of critique intended. Note that there is a strong emphasis on *interactional* theories of leadership with effectiveness being based upon the nature of the relationship between a member of staff and the leader. Your views are therefore particularly pertinent.

Three research questions lay behind the questionnaire:

1. How do trainee EPs regard their current leader in relation to skills and qualities identified as important in current theories of leadership?
2. Is size of service a relevant factor in being perceived as an effective leader?
Hypothesis: Leaders of large services will find it more challenging to be perceived as effective than those in small services. (This based upon the greater remoteness of the PEP in many large services, potentially presenting more challenges for relationship building)
3. Where do trainee EPs identify areas of development in their leadership and what does this tell us about how they regard leadership.

How do trainee EPs regard their current leader in relation to skills and qualities identified as important in current theories of leadership?

You were asked to indicate how strongly you agreed or disagreed with the following positive statements about your head of service:

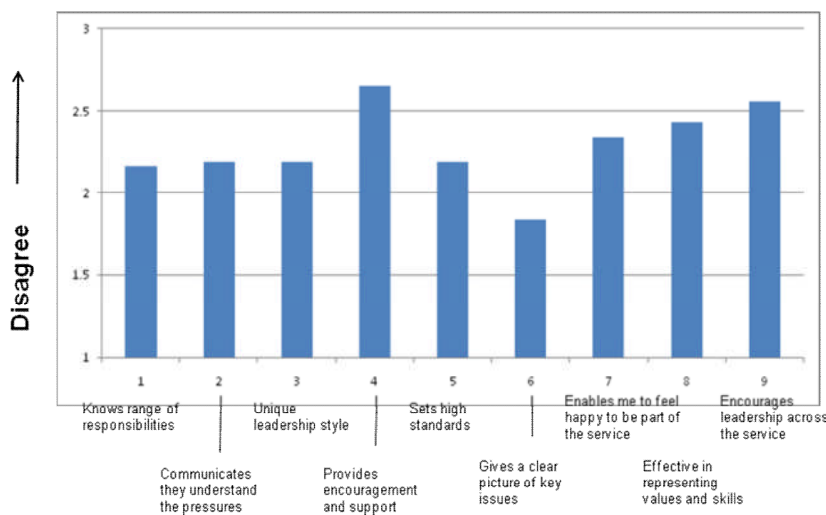
1. Knows the range of responsibilities I have
2. Communicates that (she*)he understands the pressures of the job

3. Has a style that makes her/him unique as a leader
4. Provides me with the support and encouragement I need
5. Makes sure I perform well (either directly or through a senior EP), setting high standards
6. Gives me a clear picture of the key issues for the service to ensure its survival and development
7. Enables me to feel happy to be part of the service and want to go the extra mile
8. Is effective in representing our values and skills to those outside the service
9. Sees and encourages leadership as something we all engage in whatever our role in the service

*The "she" was accidentally omitted from this statement – for which many apologies.

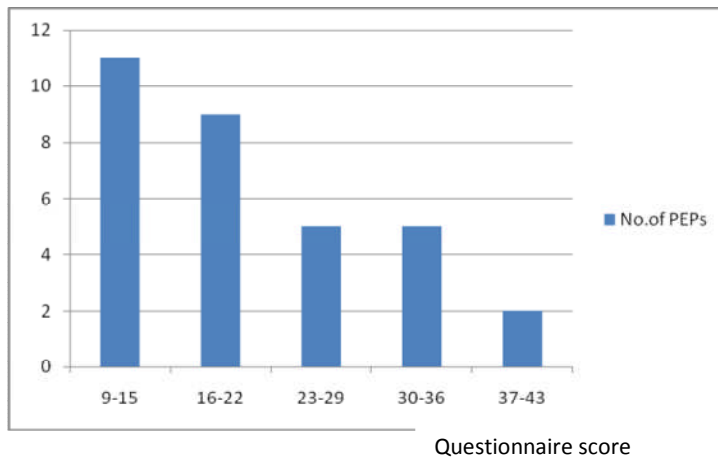
The questionnaire was scored 1-5 with 5 meaning "strongly disagree". The chart below should therefore be interpreted as "low score signifies agreement with the statement". The mean score across all statements and 32 participants was 2.35, ie on the agreement side of the neutral "not sure" position (which scored 3). I interpret this as indicating that overall trainee EPs have a positive view of their leadership.

However there were, of course variations across the different questions and across the 32 of you.



The aspect of leadership most agreed with related to questions 6,1,2,3 and 5. 88% of you thought you were given a clear picture of key issues for the service; 72% felt that the PEP was aware of your range of responsibilities, 68% thought your PEP had a style that made her/him unique as a leader and made sure you perform well. If we look at aspects that elicited the strongest disagreement: 31% of you felt that the PEP did not provide the encouragement and support you need, 22% *disagreed* that leadership was something everyone in the service engaged with, and likewise disagreed that the PEP was effective in representing your values and skills outside of the service. Although minority views, they are clearly held and are aspects of leadership which PEPs might reflect on.

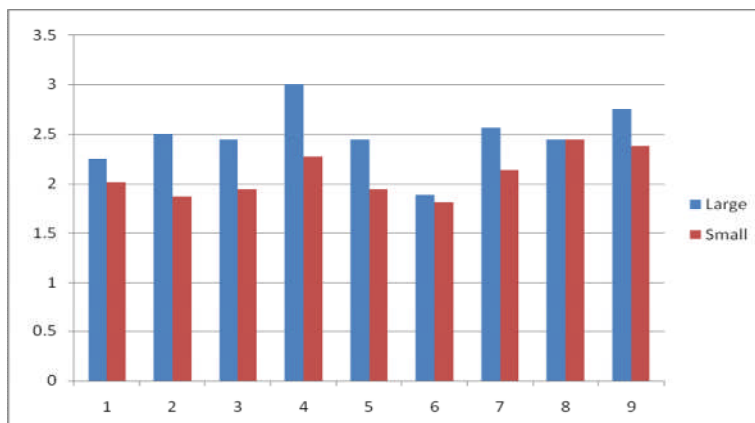
In terms of variation across the 32 of you, there was nothing like a normal distribution of scores, instead a marked positive skew towards a high level of agreement with the 9 statements as can be seen below:



11 of you agreed with all statements about your PEP and a further 9 either agreed or were not sure. Two of you “agreed strongly” with every statement. In contrast 7 of you (22%) disagreed (often strongly) with several of the statements (note that the highest score possible was 45). This suggests that in a significant minority of services leadership is either “not getting through” to its trainees, there is a mismatch between views of leadership or, in a more general sense, leadership is failing. More light is shed on this in the analysis of the improvement suggestions below.

Is size of service a relevant factor in being perceived as an effective leader?

You were asked to identify the size of the service by indicating the number of EPs in it. While this is not an exact measure it allowed me to split the responses into two equal groups: those in services of 20 or more and those in services of 19 or less. The equivalent bar chart to that above is shown below:



Across all statements those working in smaller services on average agreed more strongly; however there was substantial variation and many of you in large services thought very highly of your PEP.

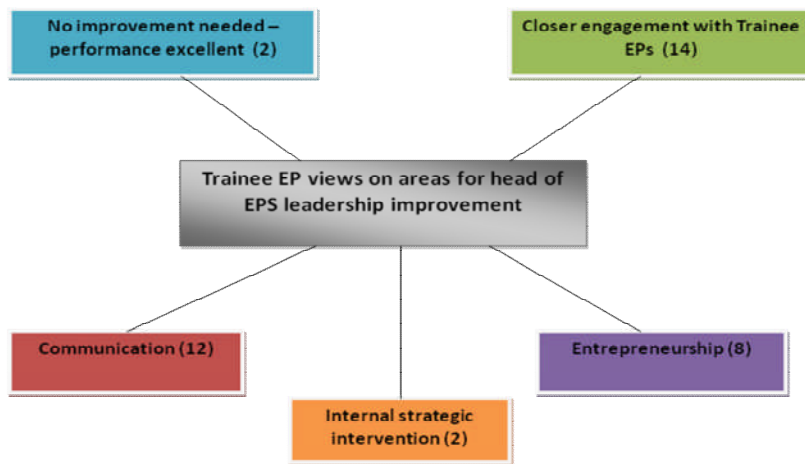
The difference in the means was not significant on a non-parametric test. The hypothesis that in large services leadership has a greater challenge in being thought effective was not supported.

Where do trainee EPs identify areas of development in their leadership and what does this tell us about how they regard leadership?

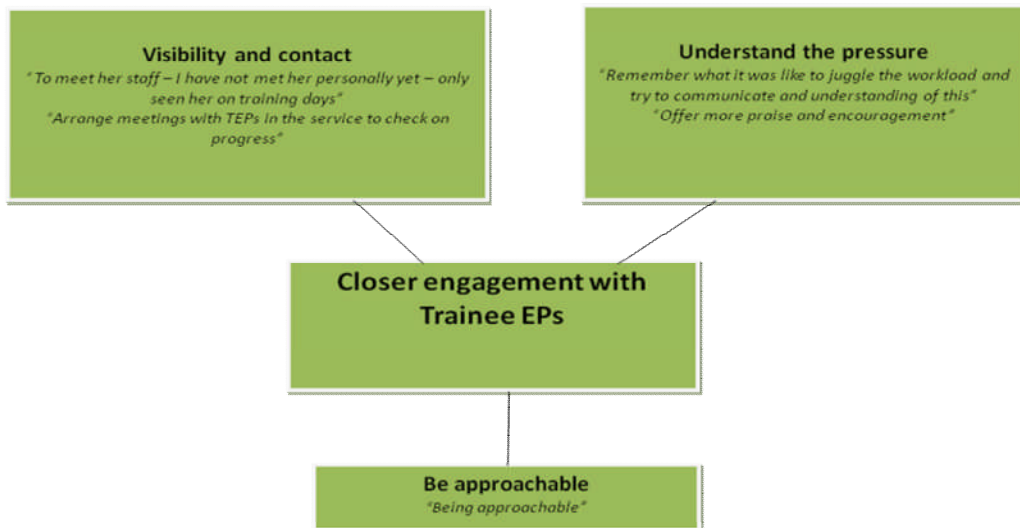
All of you made a response to the final open ended question which was as follows:

What, for you in your role and thinking of what you expect from a head of service at a time of great change, is the most important leadership improvement suggestion for your head of service?

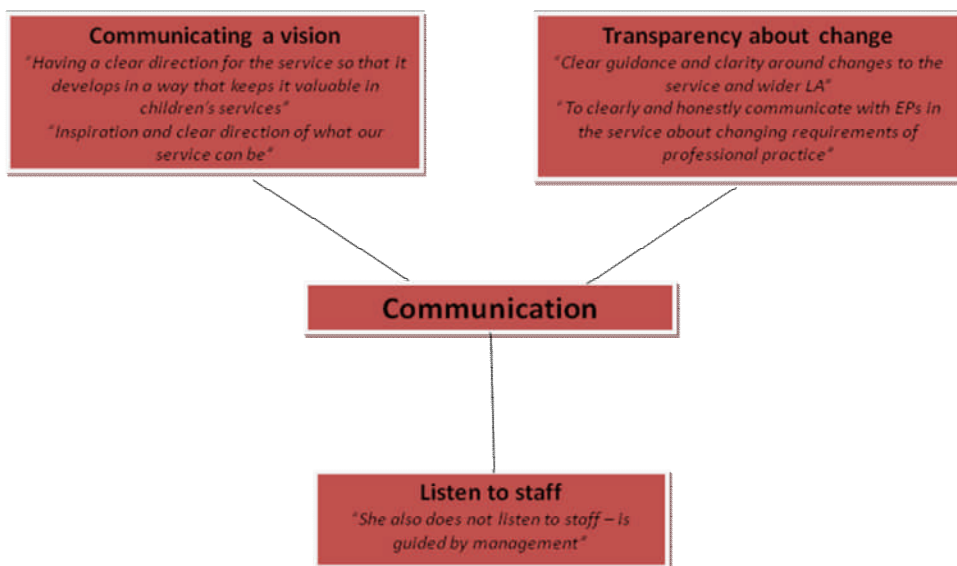
I undertook an inductive thematic analysis on your responses and found 5 overarching themes:



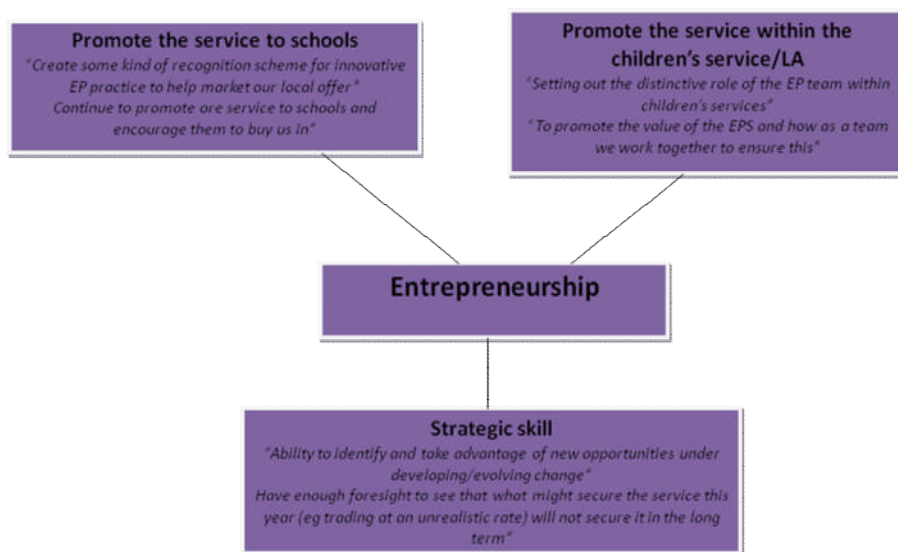
Most responses were coded against a single theme but some embraced two. Two of you were unable to identify any room for improvement and two others raised issues specific to the service context. The majority were spread across three themes with sub-themes represented below with examples of statements coded against them. In different ways all of your comments shed light on current leadership theory and gave a valuable insight into the range of experiences of leadership you were having .



To have closer engagement was the most frequent improvement suggestion and this reflects the focus of many theories that we seek a tangible relationship with our leaders and this is important in terms of developing a social identity through which we internalise the aims and values of the service. From the PEP perspective there may be strong attempts to provide that closer engagement but these are deemed insufficient. Some critical dialogue around the tension between what is feasible and what is possible could help here.



All theories of leadership dwell on communication as a core skill; the comment on "honestly communicate" relates to the construct of authenticity underpinning the relationship between the leader and followers. The sub-theme relating to a vision suggests that this well established leadership function is not present everywhere.



The theme of entrepreneurship shows that you are strongly aware of the new demands on services to earn their keep and to maintain their profile within children's services. It also suggests some frustration amongst a minority that not enough promotion is taking place

Concluding comments

Some PEPs have fed back to me that they are using the 9 statements as part of an exercise within their own services. If this seems a useful course of action you might like to propose it in your service. I am hoping that the DECP Debate bulletin might publish a more developed version of this feedback which would clearly be a basis for more discussion within the profession.

So – once again, many thanks for your contributions in this piece of work.

References

Balda, J.B. (2011) Adapting leadership theory and practice for the networked, millennial generation. *Journal of Leadership Studies*. 5(3). p.13-24.

Booker, R. (2013) Leadership of education psychology services: Fit for purpose? *Educational Psychology in Practice*. 29(2). p.197-208.