Healthy Returns: Leadership Learning and Innovation Climate in the UK Health Sector

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Abstract
Sir Ian Carruthers' (2011) report for the Department of Health entitled 'Innovation, Health and Wealth' highlighted a pressing need for the NHS to improve its capacity for innovation to deal with growing demand and shrinking/static budgets, a challenge the sector struggles to meet. This study examines the role leadership learning can play in facilitating a climate supportive of the innovation needed. A study conducted between 2012-2017 amongst 148 participants attending leadership development programmes and leading innovations in the health sector, used mixed methods to assess the climate for innovation and leadership learning, alongside the everyday experience of senior managers trying to make innovation happen. A follow-up survey and interviews explored the sustainability of learning.

The study demonstrates the impact of leadership learning on the climate for innovation, amongst participants, their teams and service users. It adds depth and richness to extant research on the dimensions influencing the climate for innovation and contextualises them in the health sector in England.

In the follow-up survey, up to 3 years after the programme had finished, 45% of respondents claimed the influence of their leadership learning remained "about the same", while 42% said it had "snowballed". Our findings highlight the important role embodied leadership learning and the space for reflection play in encouraging participants to: reconnect with purpose; create protected time and space; embrace constructive challenge; foster diversity of thinking; grow peer networks; encourage appropriate risk-taking and a sense of 'playfulness' in making innovation happen.

We conclude by suggesting that a well-designed, leadership development programme can have a positive impact on releasing innovation potential through the programme team's role modelling of the positive factors listed above, generating a very healthy return on investment for individual and organisation alike.

Keywords
Climate for innovation; health sector; leadership development; leadership learning; evaluation

1. Introduction

In this paper we explore the role leadership learning can play in supporting a climate for innovation. Our study takes place within several cohorts of leadership development programmes focused on leadership for innovation, with participants drawn from across the health sector in the south west of England.

The challenges facing the UK health sector and the role of innovation in addressing them are widely documented (e.g. Carruthers, 2011; Iles, 2011; NHS England, 2014, 2016). Reflecting on its founding commitment to high quality universal healthcare, NHS England (2014: 2) observes in the foreword to its 'Five Year Forward View':

> *Our values haven't changed, but our world has. So the NHS needs to adapt to take advantage of the opportunities that science and technology offer patients, carers and those who serve them. But it also needs to evolve to meet new challenges: we live longer, with complex health issues, sometimes of our own making.*

To this we can add: staff shortages in some key areas and successive Governments' commitment to austerity post the 2008 recession, and the constraints on funding. Substantial reductions in funding in other parts of the social care system, with reorganisations, a commitment to more 'patient-centred', integrative approaches to service delivery and increased involvement of private companies in service provision adds to the complexity. It is in this context that our participants are seeking to make innovation happen.

Our research focuses on several cohorts from two similar but distinct programmes – the first designed for senior managers close to Board level, the second for frontline managers at different stages of their career and different levels in their organisations, all involved in improving patient care. Each programme has 10-13 contact days over 8-10 months and is supported by inter-module activities, one-to-one coaching, and a range of psychometrics and diagnostics. An innovation challenge - where participants act as a 'resource group' to an invited, external client, and work on a live issue - brings immediacy.

The programmes take a relational, experiential approach to learning, focusing on and role modelling four key themes linked to developing a climate supportive of innovation: re-connecting with purpose; innovating live for patient improvement; improving the team climate for high discretionary effort; and using power and authority to engage the team (see Figure 1 below). We treat the interaction in our time together, as a 'living laboratory' to help participants experience key leadership challenges in a safe, low-risk environment, a deliberate 'parallel-processing', so that participants first experience learning around the above key themes in the 'classroom'. Inter-module activities, dialogue sessions, debriefs and reflections on learning help participants to contextualise their leadership learning and to adopt new leadership practices in their own workplaces.

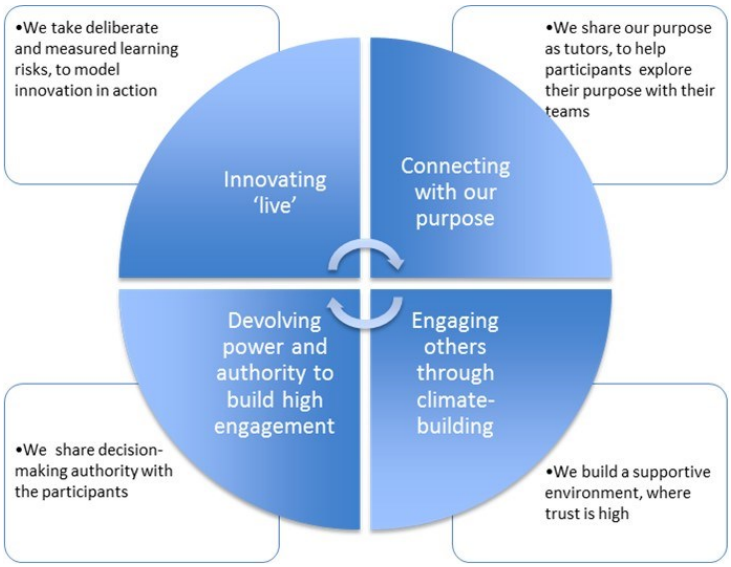

Figure 1: Developing a climate supportive of innovation

The core elements of our research are woven into the design of the programme, and inform programme development. In this paper we go on to discuss how integrating our research in this way, combining climate-building and leadership for innovation as a framework for learning with an experiential and embodied learning process, supports the transition of learning into practice and contributes to the quality and sustainability of learning.

2. Leadership learning and the climate for innovation

An emerging body of literature suggests that in complex conditions a relational approach to leadership is required (e.g. Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Mowles, 2011). We adopt a complexity approach to leadership development that pays attention to the everyday experience of participants in their leadership of innovation (Jarvis et al, 2013), and which is experiential and enquiry-led.

Kolb et al. (2014: 204) propose that experiential learning requires the facilitator to have a broad skill set, including both content and process expertise, if learners are to derive meaning and sensemaking from the intervention and to use new learning to inform their practice. Sensemaking underpins embodied, sustainable learning and is "a critical process in environments that are uncertain, ambiguous and where problem-spotting is as challenging as problem-solving" (Guiette and Vandenbempt, 2016: 86), characteristics that are certainly present in the work environments of our participants.

Reflexivity, required for sensemaking is uncomfortable as it brings to the fore the discrepancies between real and ideal circumstances; teams and individuals are unlikely to practice reflexivity without the intervention of external factors, including leadership development programmes (West, 2000). The provision of a safe, relational and reflective space that promotes learning (Vince, 1998), is an important quality of the learning environment. The valuing of all the expertise in the room, the creation of peer-to-peer learning spaces, dialogue and opportunities for informal conversations all contribute to this.

Yeo (2003: 8) observes "Participants become catalysts of change when they translate their learning into practice." Ramsey (2014) develops this, arguing for a scholarship of practice that emphasises paying attention to relations between ideas and action; inquiry "as an ongoing, sceptical and evaluative testing of actions taken or considered" (p.18); and the quality of relationships, suggesting "new (learned) action will be at the core of a practice-centred learning." (p.18). This requires an ongoing correspondence between 'learning' and 'doing' or practice.

Despite the growing significance of entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation and an ever-expanding leadership literature, *leadership of innovation* has received relatively little attention (Sheffield, 2012). The literature also uses the terms 'creativity' and 'innovation' inconsistently and it is our experience that the terms are often confused and even used interchangeably in practice.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the terms 'creativity' and 'innovation' in depth. For our purposes, we take creativity to refer to the generation of novel and useful ideas (Amabile et al, 1996) and innovation to relate to the successful implementation of creative ideas to create new value for the organisation and its stakeholders (West and Anderson, 1996). As Isaksen et al (2011: 14) claim, "You can have creativity without innovation, but you cannot have innovation without creativity." This distinction has a particular resonance for our research since the leadership challenge we have uncovered is less about creativity and more about innovation and bringing new ideas, products and processes into practice. It is this translation of creative ideas into innovative products, services and processes that Byrne et al (2009) argue is critical to an organisation's survival and ability to thrive in an increasingly competitive and complex environment.

Tidd and Bessant (2009: 16) suggest "…innovation is a process of turning opportunity into new ideas and of putting these into widely used practice." Others (e.g. West and Farr, 1990; Bledow et al, 2009) include intentionality in their definitions, claiming innovation can be defined as:

> *"The intentional introduction and application within a role, group or organisation of ideas, processes, products or procedures, new to the relevant unit of adoption, designed to significantly benefit the individual, the group, organisation or wider society."* (West and Farr, 1990: 9)

The innovation literature also focuses on different levels of analysis, from the personal level (e.g Kirton, 1976, 2003), through team level (West, 1990), to whole systems (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) and the level of society (Simonton, 1999) and addresses them from different perspectives, including social and occupational psychologists, sociologists, management scientists, and organisational behaviourists (King, 1990). It is perhaps not surprising then that the innovation research is characterised by variability of findings (Aasen, 2009).

In this paper our emphasis is on the team level and the role leadership learning can play in facilitating a climate supportive of innovation. In the words of Isaksen (2017: 131), "Creativity is the making and communicating of meaningful new connections and ideas. Innovation is the application and implementation of these insights. In order to meet the innovation challenge, leaders must be able to manage for both creativity and innovation." Participants selected for our leadership development programmes had demonstrated their ability to lead creativity (they were leading projects aimed at making a significant contribution to improving patient care). Here we explore the impact of their leadership learning on their leadership of innovation.

The uncertainty and ambiguity inherent in innovation can typically increase levels of anxiety and stress, discouraging risk-taking and creativity and encouraging habitual behaviours (Goleman and Boyatis, 2008). This can increase under pressures of time. As Amabile (2002, 57) notes, "…the participants in our study generally perceived themselves as being more creative when time pressure was high. Sadly, their diaries gave the lie to those self-assessments. There was clearly less and less creative thinking in evidence as time pressure increased."

Time pressures can also lead to a reduction in 'playfulness', often seen as an important developmental requirement and source of emotional and psychological health for individuals (Maslow, 2000). Edmondson's (1999) work in a health setting also stresses the importance of both psychological safety and the quality of relationship and trust between leaders and team members for learning and innovation to take place. These factors influence the way the group works with diversity, and its potential to offer challenge and surprise (Fonseca, 2002), for as West and Hirst (2003: 300) note:

> *…functional or knowledge diversity in the team is associated with innovation. However, when diversity begins to threaten the group's safety and integration … Where diversity reduces group members' clarity about and commitment to group objectives, levels of participation … task orientation … and support for new ideas, then it is likely that innovation attempts will be resisted.*

Trust, playfulness, risk-taking and idea-time are some of the nine dimensions of a climate supportive of creativity and innovation (Isaksen et al, 2011). They differentiate between *culture* (the values, beliefs, history, traditions, etc., that reflect the deeper foundations of the organisation and that are typically difficult to shift) and *climate* (recurring patterns of behaviour, attitudes, and feelings that characterise the everyday experience of organisational life). They claim that it is in the arena of climate where leadership can be most influential in effecting change. The Situational Outlook Questionnaire® (SOQ) as described by Isaksen et al (ibid) assesses the climate for creativity and innovation on nine dimensions (challenge and involvement; freedom; trust and openness; idea-time; playfulness/humour; conflict; idea-support; and risk-taking) and is outlined in the methodology section below.

McDaniel and DiBella-McCarthy (2012: 664) suggest "The higher one's leadership self-efficacy the more motivated, persistent, goal-directed, and resilient is the leader, and more effective she is in decision making under pressure." and that when these values are shared with other team members, self-efficacy may become 'contagious'. Shepherd et al (2009) describe the development of 'entrepreneurial spirals' and their amplifying effects. They note the importance of *trusted* "innovation champions" in fostering a climate supportive of innovative and entrepreneurial projects and, through this, the willingness of other organisational members to take risks. This, they argue, must be accompanied by the availability of "slack resources", including time, as when "resources are diminished, organizations typically focus on exploitation rather than exploration activities." (ibid: 72). Meyerson (2008) describes organisation members who can utilise these levers to effect change and innovation as 'tempered radicals' and our research findings support her view that relatively small changes – in this case in leadership behaviours – can have a significant impact.

3. Our research approach

Our research programme has emerged from five cohorts of two leadership development programmes for participants in the health sector. It takes a mixed methods approach, including questionnaires and surveys; a diagnostic which measures the climate for creativity and innovation; depth interviews; and a series of journal entries focussing on the everyday experience of leading innovation.

The research explores the climate for innovation and leadership learning, and the everyday experience of senior managers trying to make innovation happen. It is a longitudinal study covering the period April 2012-ongoing and 148 programme participants (not including their team members, some of whom completed the climate diagnostic) have taken part in at least one element of the study. For this paper we have drawn from the following elements of our study:

- 24 programme participants and their teams (147 respondents in total) who completed the Situational Outlook Questionnaire® (SOQ). The SOQ measures the climate for innovation, creativity and change on 9 dimensions, summarised in Table 1 below, comparing the team scores (derived from 53 questions) against benchmarks for innovative and stagnant organisations. It was completed pre- and post-programme during the period April 2012- February 2015.
- An end of programme questionnaire exploring leadership learning on the programme and its influence on leadership practices (84 responses) completed on the last day of the programme.
- A follow-up survey by email exploring leadership learning and innovation outcomes, which was sent to 96 programme participants (1-3 years after completion of the programme, depending on their cohort) and received 46 responses (February-April 2016).

Table 1: The nine SOQ dimensions

Dimension	**Description**
Challenge/ Involvement	The degree to which people are involved in daily operations, long-term goals, & visions
Freedom	The independence in behaviour exerted by the people in the organisation
Trust/Openness	The emotional safety in relationships
Idea-Time	The amount of time people can (and do) use for elaborating new ideas
Playfulness/Humour	The spontaneity and ease displayed within the workplace
Conflict	The presence of personal and emotional tensions in the organisation
Idea-Support	The ways in which new ideas are treated
Debate	The occurrence of encounters and disagreements between viewpoints, ideas, differing experiences and knowledge
Risk-Taking	The tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity exposed in the workplace

Participants in this study are busy managers from across the health sector in the south west of England, in clinical and non-clinical roles. One criterion for selection onto the leadership development programme is that the participant is leading at least one substantive innovation project, but they are not dedicated innovation managers; their leadership of innovation is taking place alongside their day job.

Participants and their teams are not necessarily representative of project teams across the health sector in the region as a whole. The programmes are developmental and aimed at participants who are deemed to have potential to progress in their leadership career. There is a competitive application process, including the requirement for a senior manager to support the application and programmes are typically heavily over-subscribed. Participants may, therefore, already be deemed to be 'successful' in their leadership of innovation.

4. Learning about leadership learning and leadership for innovation

Sustainability of learning and the development of leadership practices supportive of a climate encouraging of creativity and innovation are core to our leadership development practice. The first of these is relatively easy to demonstrate; for example, in the follow-up survey conducted 1-3 years after the programme had finished, 87% of respondents claimed the influence of their leadership learning remained "about the same" (45%) or had "snowballed" (42%). The second is rather more complex.

In the same follow-up survey, nearly two-thirds of respondents claimed their leadership learning had a strong or quite strong influence on innovations implemented by their teams since the programme (65%) and on their team members' abilities to implement improvements to patient care (63%). Their perceptions of the impact of their learning on their own leadership was also positive. Table 2 below summarises responses to a number of statements linking learning and capability.

Table 2: Respondents' perceptions of the influence of their leadership learning

Statement	% respondents who agree/ strongly agree
I coach and develop my team more effectively	91%
I am a more effective team member	90%
I am a more creative problem-solver	89%
I have a clearer sense of myself as a leader	87%
I am a more effective decision maker	84%
I am more influential	83%
I am more willing to take appropriate risks	82%
My team members would say I am a better leader	69%

Turning to the climate for innovation and looking across the 24 teams, spread across three cohorts, that completed the SOQ pre- and post-programme, with the exception of Conflict, every dimension changed significantly, and positively, over time. Figure 2 below compares the mean scores for these 24 teams (147 respondents) with the benchmarks for innovative and stagnant organisations (note that on the 'conflict' dimension the lower score is for innovative organisations, whereas for the other dimensions it is the higher score).

The figure shows that even pre-programme our teams were close to or above the benchmark for innovative organisations on six dimensions – challenge and involvement; trust and openness; idea-time; conflict; idea-support; and debate – and this may reflect the selection process. Post-programme, the scores were close to or above the benchmark for innovative organisations on all nine dimensions, with the biggest gain seen in the playfulness/humour benchmark.

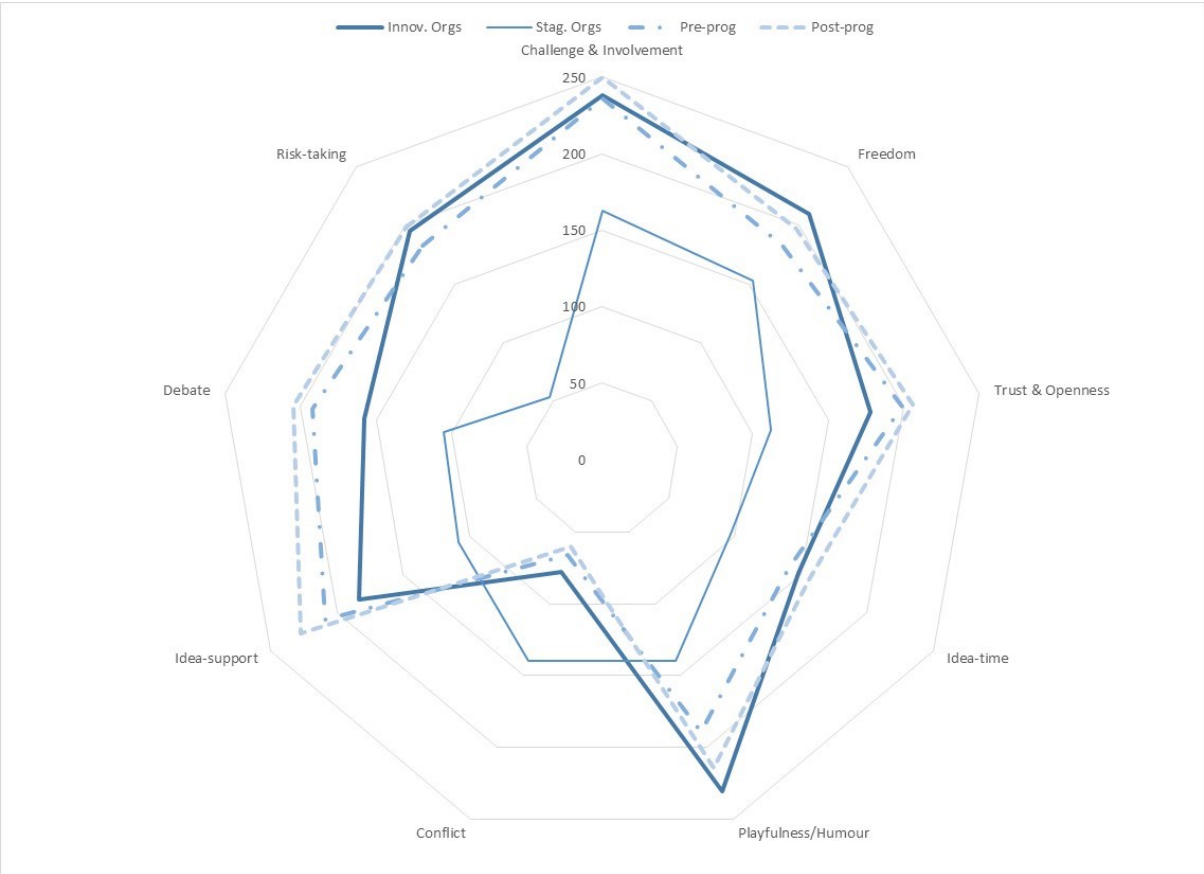

Figure 2: Average scores for the 24 teams completing the SOQ pre- and post programme

The picture was not, however, consistent at a team level. Overall, using paired T tests, nine teams saw a statistically significant improvement in the climate for innovation at the 95% confidence level, whilst four teams' results became worse over time and the remaining teams saw no statistically significant movement. (In all cases where there was no statistically significant movement, the climate had either already been good, or reasonable.) Consistent themes in the teams that saw a statistically significant improvement in their climate were that participants paid more attention to managing the climate for innovation and delegated more authority to team members. Participants as team leaders also worked to build more support with key stakeholders across the wider organisation; the more radical the innovation the more necessary this was deemed to be.

Interviews with the participants leading the teams whose climates had worsened revealed a common theme: the lack of wider organisational support for the innovation, one going as far as to note a "culture of bullying and intimidation". In three of the four cases, the innovation project was subject to externally imposed strategic or policy decisions, beyond the team's circle of influence; this too may have played a part.

The individual dimensions with the greatest number of teams experiencing a statistically significant positive shift were playfulness/humour (7 teams); risk-taking (5 teams); and challenge and involvement (4 teams). The improvement in the playfulness/humour dimension, both overall and in individual teams is particularly noteworthy as it is the only dimension of climate to feature in the three dimensions shown to have the greatest influence in both incremental and radical change (Isaksen, 2013).

An over-arching theme was the opportunity the programmes provided for participants to step back from their daily busyness, to slow down and reflect. In their responses to the end of programme evaluations participants highlighted the important role reflection and slowing the pace play in helping them to: reconnect with purpose; create protected time and space, for themselves and their team members; embrace constructive challenge; foster diversity of thinking; and grow peer networks. They also valued learning to delegate power and authority to team members to build high commitment and involvement, to view situations from different perspectives and tell their story in a way that recognises different priorities and to encourage appropriate risk-taking and a sense of 'playfulness' in making innovation happen.

At a personal level, participants noted increased confidence, creativity, resilience, courage, flexibility, motivation, energy and a stronger sense of agency (an ability to influence). They commented that increased awareness and reflection meant they tended to trust themselves and their teams more and encouraged them to be more tolerant of others' views and ideas when they differed from their own. The aspects of the programme that had the greatest influence on these developments were storytelling, coaching, the commitment groups and the time and space for reflection, and the innovation challenge.

5. Discussion and implications

In creating a space to break habits and adopt new leadership practices, the findings from our research confirm the potential value of leadership learning in facilitating a climate supportive of innovation, to the benefit of participants, their team members and organisations, and most importantly to patients and service users. The following play a part in releasing this potential:

a) *Slowing the pace:* Just as time pressures and 'busyness' reduce creativity and innovation (Amabile, 2002; Shepherd et al, 2009), so too they militate against deep learning and sensemaking (Guiette and Vandenbempt, 2016). It is not unusual on the first module for facilitators to be asked to 'up the tempo'. It can be hard to resist the temptation to comply with these requests – there is always more we would wish to share - yet by the end of the programme it is the pace and the space it allows to reflect, on and in action, that is often most highly valued. We suggest it is this space for reflection and sensemaking that facilitates the transition of learning from the 'classroom' to informed leadership practice.
b) *A relational approach that pays attention to the quality of conversation and relationship:* Complexity approaches view leadership as a relational process and suggest the quality of relationship influences the quality of the learning environment (Jarvis et al, 2013) and with it promotes or discourages learning (Vince, 1998). The quality of conversation influences the movement and uptake of ideas, and

the containment of the anxiety that inevitably accompanies deep learning. This reinforces the need for 'slowing the pace', for commitment groups and fostering the development of peer networks, and for opportunities to engage in different forms of 'conversation', such as dialogue and appreciative enquiry.

c) *Mindful and learning-ful facilitation:* Not only do facilitators of experiential and enquiry-led learning require a broad skill set (Kolb et al, 2014), they also need to engage as embodied learners (Billy and Jowitt, 2012), exposing themselves to the risks, vulnerabilities and anxieties provoked by learning (Vince, 1998) that they are asking participants to engage with. This can be an uncomfortable experience for educators as they let go of their sense of self as expert and share power and authority with the group. Participants may experience similar emotions when they take their learning into practice; their experience on the programme builds confidence and courage to persist.

d) *Visible process and learning:* In environments characterised by complexity and ambiguity (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011), where it can be 'hard to see the wood for the trees', making the process and learning visible can help to contain anxiety. As well as being open and transparent about the learning processes we are adopting and why, we also find participants value having a central framework, model and/or tools and techniques. These can provide a shared language and focal point for learning, something concrete to hold onto. For the programmes in this research study, we have used the concept of 'climate' as a framework. Table 3 below provides examples of the activities facilitators and participants have undertaken to encourage a climate supportive of creativity and innovation.

e) *Planning to improvise:* Uncertainty and unpredictability are inevitable companions of innovation, yet too often we are taken by surprise when things do not go to plan (Sheffield, 2012). Complexity approaches and ideas of emergence suggest we should plan to improvise (Weick, 1998). Far from abandoning planning, planning to improvise sees the plan for what it is, an expression of intended action that allows us to notice, pivot and respond appropriately so that we are not surprised to be surprised. An ability to improvise effectively is a capacity implicit in leadership for innovation and fostering a climate that supports it. We role model it in our programme design; we make our purpose and plan visible to participants, who will also see us pivot and respond when appropriate in the service of learning.

Table 3: Climate dimensions in practice

Dimension	Brought into programme design, for example by …	Participants bring into their leadership practice, for example by …
Challenge & Involvement	• Return of power and sense of agency to group, including: - Encourage content suggestions for programme trial - build coaching skills to help participants 'let go' of agenda-owning/decision-making	• Increased collaboration/earlier involvement of others • Seek perspectives beyond own team/organisation • Greater, earlier patient involvement • Use of peer networks to test and challenge new ideas
Freedom	• Participants plan final-day presentation to invited audience, sharing learning and leadership practices. External audience sense the spontaneity of event, as they and tutors learn what participants have valued.	• Increased delegation of power and authority • Active discouragement of permission-seeking culture • Avoid 'over-planning' – expect the unexpected
Trust & Openness	• Tutors share work interests with participants, disclosing current projects and passions • Seek and respond to feedback • Tutors acknowledge and work with own difference and diversity.	• Appreciative Inquiry – take energy from what we do well • Seek and provide opportunities for constructive feedback • Promote coaching and active listening

Dimension	Brought into programme design, for example by …	Participants bring into their leadership practice, for example by …
Idea-time	• Inter-module activities create 'space' in the programme for e.g. - innovation challenge - introduction of co-created changes to programme.	• Allocate and protect time in team meetings, away days/off-sites • Make time and space to reflect on and in action
Playfulness/humour	• Pay attention to the quality of conversation and relationship • Create time, space, opportunities for spontaneity and emergence.	• Take time out as team for informal conversation • Use creative methods, e.g. drawing, storytelling, Lego
Conflict	• Coaching and courageous conversations pre-empt issues becoming problems.	• Value diversity and difference • Surface and deal with issues in timely and transparent fashion
Idea-support	• 'Commitment groups' (8/9 participants) provide peer-coaching to share: - learning aims from programme - ideas for learning into practice	• Storytelling targeted to audience • Delegation increases time to promote projects and seek support • Foster "innovation champions"
Debate	• Individual reflections in full-circle sessions bring: - equality of opportunity - value to diverse group	• Value diversity of views and all the different expertise available to you. • Allow time to get beneath surface issues
Risk-taking	• Enable more learning risks, knowing they are purposeful/intended to aid learning • Role model 'letting go' and acting into the unknown	• Accept failure as inevitable side effect of innovation – and learn from it • Awareness (of self, impact, organisational priorities, costs, etc) mitigates risk

6. Conclusion

To summarise, we believe that the experiential and embodied approach of these programmes contributes to the quality and sustainability of learning. Much of the learning content is delivered "off-line"; the modules provide a structure for exploring real world experience and collectively applying the learning. As facilitators we role model inquiry and adaptiveness, and creating the right environment, which participants then emulate with their own work teams.

Embodied leadership learning, paying attention to climate for innovation and the often small changes leaders can facilitate to improve it (Meyerson, 2008) can encourage a virtuous spiral to develop, that improves the likelihood of successful implementation and innovation outcomes. For example, improved delegation and empowering team members increases *freedom, challenge and involvement,* and *trust and openness,* and this time and attention given to increasing the capacity of the team, frees up time and capacity for the leader to influence the wider organisation and to generate *idea-support.* With increased trust and openness, comes a reduced perception of needing to seek 'permission' before acting that encourages appropriate *risk-taking* and an increased willingness to seek out *idea-time* that may otherwise be seen as 'unproductive time' in a busy work schedule. Paying attention to the quality of conversation and relationship encourages *playfulness/humour* and facilitates more open *debate* and dialogue, surfacing issues before they become problems so that *conflict* is reduced.

In role modelling leadership behaviours that are supportive of a climate for innovation through skilful facilitation and thoughtful programme design, we suggest leadership development programmes can have a positive impact on releasing innovation potential, generating a very healthy return on investment for individual and organisation alike.

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