

The class of Easingwold: reflections on the Clore Leadership Programme_

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By Tom Bewick

“Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life. Don’t be trapped by dogma – which is living with the results of other people’s thinking. Don’t let the noise of other’s opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most importantly, have the courage to follow your intuition.” – **Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple**

“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.” – **George Bernard Shaw**

I have just returned from a two-week intensive management and leadership course outside the tiny hamlet of *Easingwold*. My ‘home’ for the duration has been a Cabinet Office facility nestled majestically, at this time of year, in the fog prone *Vale of York*. Back in my own home one of the first newspaper articles I get chance to read headlines: ‘Can your manager manage?’ It’s a fair question because poor management skills, apparently, costs British industry over £9 billion a year: equivalent to the government’s annual further education budget.

The *Clore Duffield Foundation’s* new initiative – part of Gordon Brown’s £12 million Cultural Leadership Programme – provides both practitioners and managers with essential skills for leadership roles within the cultural sector. One short-course participant described the experience as the ‘edited highlights’ of the longer running, *Clore Fellowship Programme*, where individuals can take an entire year to undertake work-placements, mentoring, self-reflection and leadership skills training.

In the space of two-weeks, twenty-five of us have spent nearly every waking moment together. We’ve tackled topics such as strategic planning, marketing, financial modelling, fundraising, how to lobby, decision-making, governance, charity law and media training. We’re a mixed bunch: curators, musicians, theatre directors, technicians, film producers, gallery managers and arts programme administrators. The variety of experience turns out to be one of our major strengths. We’ve had, of course, a great deal of fun along the way, which has included trips offsite to enjoy cultural offerings, such as Alan Ayckbourn’s new play at Scarborough’s Stephen Joseph Theatre.

I feel considerably more knowledgeable about the people that work in our cultural sectors and the issues they face. I've benefited immensely at a personal level from the stimulation, time and space afforded by this length of programme. Indeed, it's the first bit of structured learning I've had since completing my Masters degree over a decade ago. And crucially, I've made some new friends.

The profile of the Easingwold intake is interesting. There were very few ethnic minority students and the ratio of male to female participants was almost 30-70 – the reverse of the current management cadre. It's a rather obvious but nevertheless depressing fact that so many existing senior cultural leaders are white upper-middle class men. And will this ever change, one wonders? A stated aim of the cultural leadership programme is to “diversify the workforce”, and if this course were the benchmark for the whole initiative then things have not got off to a bad start. After all, potentially, I've just made friends with the senior cultural leaders of the future. And the majority of them are women.

The short course programme travels around the country. This is the second intake and, on this occasion, was hosted by the government's Emergency Planning College. I rather jokingly refer to it as the ‘open prison’ because of its ominous history and the seclusion offered from everyday distractions such as noise pollution and shopping. Taken into public ownership in 1937 the college began life as a civil defence facility set up to contemplate the horrors of Nazi Germany dropping poisonous gas on major population centres. Today, this 268-acre site has a more corporate use. A retired major general, now the college principal, leads a presentation describing the facility as “unclassified”. So despite the ‘security man in the B & Q shed’, he says we're not actually being taught in a top-secret facility even if for many of us it feels that way.

I find the college's mission statement rather unfathomable and full of management jargon. At one point the retired soldier proudly declared his role as being: “to deliver multi-agency training and doctrine to support UK resilience.” Whatever that means?

The course starts in earnest with a pep talk from course director, Chris Smith. For an ex-Cabinet Minister and celebrated supporter of all things cultural this is perhaps one of the most understated but nevertheless effective leaders you are ever likely to meet. The military approach to leadership teaches obedience to authority exemplified by the way our previous speaker bounced around the room, at times, like a caged animal looking to escape his enclosure. But Chris's leadership style is less gregarious, more engaging. He wins everyone over with his humility and what can perhaps be described as a more informal leadership style. Not bad for a Right Honourable!

One of the 'killer facts' to emerge is that there are (allegedly) 13.5 million websites dedicated to the subject of management and leadership. It's a relief then that Chris has come to the conclusion that for all this management theory, probably only five things really matter:

1. See the big picture – tell a convincing narrative about what needs to be achieved.
2. Be prepared to fail, take risks.
3. Success does not come in a straight line.
4. Know yourself, and be the person you really are – passion, morals, values, beliefs all play a part.
5. Build relationships – relational management is the key.

This last point is significant. Over the years the management literature has extolled the virtues of the so-called 'charismatic leader', the lone heroic figure (usually male) at the top of an organisation succeeding in the face of adversity. But leaders should be judged by their ability to build relationships, and with this, an ability to deliver change by enlisting the support of others. Apparently Nelson was an admirer of Napoleon. In the National Maritime Museum there is a letter from Nelson to a fellow compatriot in praise of Bonaparte's leadership style. Napoleon, he says, addresses his subordinates not by saying "*allez!*" [go!]; but "*allonz!*" – [shall we go together!]. As John Holden of *Demos* describes in his background paper for the programme:

'The Leaders of today and tomorrow need to be able to get things done in circumstances where they have no direct controlling authority.'

There are a few points during the course when things get psychoanalytical in nature. Before the fortnight commences every prospective student must complete the 'four seasons' questionnaire. Steve O'Smotherly of *'Now That's Different Ltd.'* leads the session. He explains the different behaviours that shape the way we work, how we like to be treated, including those traits we are more likely to use with others. The major difference with this set of psychometrics, however, from other known approaches is that the four seasons 'test' does not make value judgements about which management style is best.

Based on the work of Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, the model describes 4 different 'character types', one for each of the four seasons in the year (Winter, Spring, Summer and Autumn). At a holistic level, our preferences tend to be for one or two of the following:

- Competitive, very driven, task focussed (these are some of the characteristics of the **Winter** season)
- Creative, spontaneous, enthusiastic (these are some of the characteristics of the **Spring** season)
- Caring, supportive, nurturing (these are some of the characteristics of the **Summer** season)
- Structured, process-focussed, timely (these are some of the characteristics of the **Autumn** season)

In terms of my test results, I am almost equally Spring (29%) – 'creative' and Winter (28%) – 'action' orientated. In other words, according to the model, my typical strengths include: 'acting creatively on intuition'; 'sensitive to others' feelings'; 'resilient in times of stress'; and 'acts rapidly to get results'. The downside to these seasonal characteristics are that I may also, at times, 'talk too much'; get frustrated with those who 'are slow at delivering results' especially if they are 'too task orientated'.

Compared to most other participants I had the closest Winter season orientation, but interestingly there was not a single primary preference for this season in our entire group. The most popular preferences were Spring and Summer, 'creativity' and 'empathy'. Does this mean that leaders in the Arts are a touch soft? Surely every organisation needs a Winter – the person who is going to lay down the law when things need to get done? It would be fascinating to see what pattern emerges across all 350 Clore programme participants.

Paul Evans, a National Museums Director of the Royal Armouries in Leeds is I'd say, most definitely a Winter. His presentation demonstrated that there are times in the cultural sector when a strong dose of directional leadership is what's required to rescue an organisation from the proverbial mire.

In the late 1990s the Royal Armouries, a private finance initiative (PFI), was on its knees and in receivership. Paul Evans was recruited from the Rank Organisation, with his commercial sector experience, as a chief operating officer. He recounts the first management team meeting he attended, where fourteen curators were present. “There was not a single finance person or marketing manager on the executive board”, he says. Today, his senior management team is made up of one senior curator, with finance, IT, marketing, business development and senior managers also taking part.

The problem with the Armouries when Paul took over was that its culture was complacent, as he puts it, ‘lots of back slapping’. As the story unfolds it is clear that drastic action was required, letting go of some people, and re-designing the business model. Despite being close to resignation twice Paul has been in charge for six years. His tenure has made the Armouries into one of the gems of modern community engagement. Not just a collection of weapons, but succeeding commercially – as one of the few national museums in England outside London. Paul is honest about both his successes and shortcomings, which is a refreshing characteristic in any leader. But in the discussion after the session it was evident that his heavy handed, ‘take no prisoners’, approach to management has jarred with some of the more arts-based, ‘empathy-driven’ audience.

I rise at seven each morning. After breakfast we all gather for the daily review. With our facilitators, Martin Pople and Anna Umbima, we spend half an hour or so talking about the previous day and what went well, and what we would change. It’s a credit to the entire Clore team (including Fiona back at base) just how professional the organisation has been. Meeting the needs of a diverse sector in a limited period of time is a tough assignment, but they manage to respond to our individual needs remarkably well. After all, not every session is going to hit the mark.

One of the most disappointing sessions for me was the one on strategic marketing. The presenter was engaging enough and eager to adjust to the circumstances of the group. But what this subject required was a practitioner – someone who had professionally marketed an arts-based organisation – and could demonstrate step by step the benefits that had been delivered. Instead we were given a very dense theoretical account that at times got lost in the detail.

The difficulty for those working in the cultural sector is that more often than not the product being marketed is ‘intangible’. Our presenter talked about the process of marketing ‘baked beans’. But of

course cultural product does not necessarily sit on supermarket shelves. It's more ephemeral. The arts and cultural industries are competing for peoples' attention in a fiercely 'time-poor' consumer world. I'm not sure we ever properly addressed this challenge during the session.

During lunch one day, I find myself sitting next to a civil servant who's not connected to the Clore. He was on a course examining the recommendations from the report produced in the aftermath of the July 7th bombings. It transpires that while the immediate emergency response had been faultless, the lack of underground communications where the tubes had been bombed, hampered the rescue effort. This issue was first highlighted during the Kings Cross fire in 1988, yet nearly 20 years on this still had not been addressed sufficiently by the authorities. If it had the rescue services would not have suffered such a breakdown in communications on that fatal July day. We both concluded that this was a case of a catastrophic failure of leadership if ever there was one.

Angela Whelan from *Ashridge*, the business school that played host to the first short course, is one of the most popular speakers during week one. It's the first of our sessions on presentation skills and the way she goes about teaching us how to 'make an impact' does justice to every textbook or manual on the subject. Indeed, we learn the 'techniques' that any speaker can deploy to make memorable and inspiring presentations. Everyone knows that first impressions count, but it was the first time I'd heard that you have just seven seconds to make your mark – barely, of course, enough time to introduce yourself to an audience.

According to Ange as she's content to be known: "the best communicators are still misunderstood – unlike Morse code there is no fixed interpretation of each signal we transmit and receive! The result is that when we communicate we always transmit to receive something – we just may not succeed in transmitting or receiving our *intended* meaning."

Effective communication is achieved through a mixture and balance of:

- Purposeful posture, movement and gesture.
- Energy and commitment to your audience.

- Effective eye contact.
- Appropriate use of voice and tone.
- Sensitivity and Acuity.
- Active listening.
- A confident and positive outlook.

During the first week we had a session from a company called 'id:ology' – indeed, a whole day devoted to 'searching for the edge'. This exercise bordered on psychotherapy at times as participants were encouraged to delve deep into their own 'persona' and figure out what 'perception' they had of themselves as well as what people might have of them. The session was delivered competently and passionately enough but it is fair to say that for some it was just a little beyond their comfort zone. I suppose that's the nature of these things: go digging and you might be surprised at what you find.

By the second week of the programme the intensity is starting to get to me. The organisers should plan more downtime between the daytime and evening sessions. I'm desperate to go jogging around the grounds – there's over 268 acres of beautiful autumn colour exploding all around me. Such beauty can't be enjoyed, however, when you have rigid set meal times and a 10-hour day sitting in seminar rooms and lecture theatres.

Despite the visible fatigue showing on the faces of several participants, we are heartily engaged with a whole day of media training. John Hammond and a team of professional journalists put us through our paces during a roller coaster ride of media, press and radio interviews. I decide to hit the airwaves with the proposed National Skills Academy in Live Performance. For TV, the local BBC Look North anchor (she has taken the day off to undertake this exercise!), challenges me on the 2012 Olympics and whether the government has fully got a grip on the opening and closing ceremonies – "of what will be the greatest show on earth". My robust reply of course is the National Skills Academy – "that's why we need to invest now in world-class technical skills", I say.

There are five key things to remember about giving media interviews:

1. Know your audience
2. Understand the WIFM principle – What's in it for me!
3. Address the head, heart and wallet
4. Use empathy, explanation and example
5. Be passionate

Some of the most popular sessions were not necessarily the ones that appeared so on the timetable. We had great fun during Richard Lazarus's seminar on finance and accounting. As a key player in the Arts Council's Stabilisation Team he brought the subject to life with real case studies. In a very accessible way he highlighted how to read financial accounts and balance sheets, demystifying the jargon. Building on Richard's work AEA consulting ran a complete session on financial modelling. We all had the opportunity to build our own Excel spreadsheets that will assist us in more efficiently anticipating the effect of different cost assumptions. So if a theatre, for example, is planning to expand the number of productions during a given year the model helps you quickly understand the impact of this on both income and expenditure forecasts. At the click of a button, programmed with Excel, you can play around with raising or lowering the ticket prices and see instantly the impact on the bottom line.

Similarly, the sessions that ran on governance and charity law were potentially quite a dry affair. But both presenters – Prue Skene and Keith Arrowsmith – managed to take the material and make it highly relevant to the daily operational context that those leading in the cultural sector must deal with. Thanks to the information that was handed out I feel a lot more confident that my own organisation is on the right tracks when it comes to following good practice.

What I found remarkable about the Easingwold group was that throughout the entire fortnight there was no evidence of people splitting up into factions or forming cliques. Even the most well run organisations usually have their malcontents. Everyone made the effort, however, to get to know one another. There was a real spirit of comradeship. Even when we were split up into groups to

undertake a team presentation the level of cooperation and positive support for one another was laudable.

For most of the second week, during our so-called free time, we met in our small groups to prepare the presentation. Chris Smith has set each group some really challenging questions. Alison, Edward, Helen, Kirsty, Kristine and myself pull the short straw. Our presentation must address:

'In an increasingly globalised world what does cultural identity really mean?'

This question goes to the heart of contemporary debates about multi-culturalism, diversity, faith and integration. And in the context of this country, is at the centre of debates about Britishness. In recent times we have seen a succession of government Ministers argue that Muslim women wearing the 'veil' have no place in modern British society.

Madonna and Guy Richie have received a barrage of criticism for plucking a Malawian baby – like some consumer accessory – for adoption, from his cultural homeland in Africa. Some people say that Britain is sleepwalking to segregation – cultural, ethnic and faith communities set apart from one another – divided by race, class, poverty and religion. Others take a more positive view, arguing that globalisation, new technology and patterns of consumption are breaking down the old hierarchies, fostering a new and shared understanding between the world's many different cultures.

As a group we quickly decided on roles and responsibilities. We set our presentation up in the main theatre – Newsnight Review style – with a panel debate, including audio and video clips. I get the opportunity to play anchor, facilitating different points of view. We didn't deliver the most humorous presentation although the feedback from our invited guests appeared to appreciate the way we'd handled a serious and difficult subject.

Most evenings we took the opportunity to unwind in the bar. On our last night we set out for the Durham Ox – a Michelin graded restaurant – in the next village. This was a fantastic evening of merriment and song. I've no idea what our coach driver thought of our repertoire of 'row row the boat' and 'London's burning', expertly conducted by Ed Millard – a coordinator with the Northumberland County Music Service.

On the last day, nursing a hangover and a hoarse throat, there is one last session on 'visioning and creativity' led by Jon Teckman: lots of drawing, brainstorming, future mapping and crystal ball

gazing. There's just about time for the group photo before people must head off home: partners, families, children and work now await us!

The Clore short-course programme has not only introduced us to the discipline of leadership, it has created new bonds of kinship across the cultural industries. These are potentially real and enduring friendships that may yet define the future of the cultural sector to come.

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Relevant websites:

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