



## Working with power and experience - How to develop and focus to achieve the most impact as leader

**Principal Consultant, James Barrett, shares the simple framework that we have developed to support nonprofit leaders to maximise their leadership impact and focus their leadership development. The framework was first developed during our three year Leadership Development Programme for students' unions, commissioned by the NUS, and is now used to shape the design of our other leadership programmes.**

Three years ago, CCE was appointed as delivery partner for the student movement's leadership development programme (LDP). We knew something of the challenges faced by students' union (SU) leaders, and we could share academic expertise about the qualities of outstanding leadership, but we wanted to observe the SU system more acutely so that we could really understand the specific leadership needs in this particular context: *what does leadership need to achieve in unions and across the student movement?* At the same time we also wanted to design a lively interactive leadership development experience to bring the issues to life.

With this in mind we asked the NUS Strategic Support Unit to describe anonymous case studies of typical tough problems that unions regularly have to face, and we used these stories to create a large scale simulation for all participants on the LDP: a scenario of a SU in crisis and at loggerheads with its university. We ran the simulation with three consecutive cohorts of leaders, and on all three occasions we noticed that participants in the same roles reacted to problems in a remarkably similar way.

At the end of the simulation we placed participants in smaller groups to debrief, facilitating them to analyse the dynamics that they had experienced in their system. One group got into an animated discussion about the way participants' behaviour varied according to the amount of power that had in their simulation roles and the degree of leadership experience that they brought to their roles. It seemed to reflect 'real life' out there in the movement.

This triggered a series of excited conversations within our Cass CCE team, and we started to draw up a 2x2 grid to focus our thinking about effective leadership in the student movement, and how best to structure the programme. Over the last two years we've tested the framework with leaders within the SU movement, and it really seems to strike a chord for people. It has triggered some great conversations in the movement between elected officers, external trustees, and permanent staff about how they can work together most effectively in the hugely complex structure of SUs. More recently we've tested the framework with a wider circle of non-profit leaders, experimented with it on our New and Aspiring CE Programmes, and now use it regularly to shape the design of our bespoke LD programmes.



	<b>1. Emerging Leaders</b>	<b>2. Influential Leaders</b>	<b>3. New Leaders</b>	<b>4. Established Leaders</b>
<b>Focus Your Impact</b>	<p><b>For maximum impact step forward</b> Take up your authority positively - fully embrace your leadership role. Adopt a team approach to achieve your goals. Share ideas and analysis, volunteer to lead projects, and build connections across the organisation.</p>	<p><b>For maximum impact inspire</b> Use your knowledge and experience to inspire stakeholders and build dynamic alliances, collaborate, foster creativity and innovation, and leverage maximum influence. Role model your values.</p>	<p><b>For maximum impact engage others</b> Take a helicopter view: articulate your goals in the wider strategic context and notice what works in your organisational culture. Foster relations to test your ideas, engage others and build consensus for your plans.</p>	<p><b>For maximum impact empower</b> Broaden your leadership perspective further and extend your leadership upwards and outwards. Empower as much as possible, share knowledge and experience, and enable others to stretch and shine.</p>
<b>Focus Your Development</b>	<p><b>Discover yourself and others</b> Develop your leadership by seeking opportunities to stretch and test yourself and learn new skills. Get exposure to other disciplines and other types of people. Build your leadership toolkit through courses and reading. Discover yourself through profiling tools.</p>	<p><b>Grasp political complexity</b> Develop your leadership through opportunities for positional power (secondments, board roles), having a mentor, and shadowing leaders to understand how they think. Use structured learning to build a theoretical framework from your experience.</p>	<p><b>Be curious about your systems and context</b> Develop your leadership through robust exec coaching and action learning - make sense of your experiences in the context of organisational systems and situational leadership. Relate these to others' experiences too.</p>	<p><b>Stretch intellectually, reach outwards and upwards</b> Develop your leadership through senior trustee and sector-wide positions, and intellectual challenge: participate in thought-leadership and acquire sophisticated analytic tools. Mentor others, and commission cross-organisational projects.</p>
<b>Key Activities</b>	<p>360 Feedback &amp; PDP Networking Training courses to build your leadership 'toolkit' Reading personality profiling</p>	<p>360 Feedback &amp; PDP Networking Secondments board roles a mentor shadowing structured learning</p>	<p>360 Feedback &amp; PDP Networking Executive coaching action learning realtime consulting</p>	<p>360 Feedback &amp; PDP Networking Senior trustee roles sector-wide positions think tanks analytic tools mentoring others</p>

There are various ways in which you can use the grid:

- To analyse your overall leadership role and locate yourself in a single quadrant, to prioritise how you will focus your development and what you will do to maximise your impact
- To analyse the different aspects of your leadership role - placing yourself in different quadrants according to your various core tasks and key stakeholders – deciding how you will tackle your core tasks and work with stakeholders most effectively and how you will focus your development for each one
- To design your own personal development plan by reviewing your learning needs for each quadrant.



**Emerging leaders** are described in the bottom left quadrant – those who are starting out in the first and middle tiers of management with limited direct power over others, who don't yet have a great deal of experience to draw on. If you find yourself here, you can achieve the biggest impact by **stepping forward** and fully embracing your role. Successful leaders in this quadrant shift from doing tasks for themselves to adopting a team approach to achieving their goals. They use their authority positively and supportively: to adopt an encouraging, coaching approach and foster a creative team spirit; to provide safety and structure, reframe problems, manage conflict, and protect the team from undue pressure; and to define expectations, set goals, hold people to account, and encourage excellence.

Successful emerging leaders are keen to learn. They reach outwards from their immediate teams, building links across the wider organisation, volunteering to lead broader projects, and sharing ideas for improving systems and services. In doing this they test and stretch themselves, and acquire new skills. They encounter people with different personality types and colleagues who practice different disciplines. This enables them to find out about their own preferences too, and learn to flex and adapt their leadership styles. They also attend courses and pursue learning that develops their leadership 'toolkits'.

As an example of this, our evaluations show that LDP participants really value receiving 360 degree feedback and individual coaching using [Outstanding Leadership research](#) from The Work Foundation. It has helped them to be more self-aware and to realise how important it is to flex their leadership styles in order to be more effective. The feedback has also really helped participants to grasp the fundamental importance of team development – that you “grow people through performance” – and we have witnessed some excellent examples of how participants have progressed as leaders by investing in their teams.

**Influential leaders** are located in the bottom right quadrant - those who have accumulated valuable specialist skills and experience, but don't hold formal positions near the top of their organisations, as well as those leaders who are at the top of smaller organisations. If this describes your situation, you can maximize your impact by influencing and **inspiring** outwards as widely as possible, collaborating, and supporting creativity and innovation. Leaders in this quadrant need to trade on their indispensable knowledge to engage stakeholders and build alliances, e.g. joining high-level advisory bodies and influencing senior figures by finding synergies with them – established leaders achieve their ambitions by supporting others to deliver on their goals too.

Key to this is having sophisticated interpersonal skills that enable you to connect with the “hierarchies” in your external network, and to navigate organisational politics whilst still role modelling your values, staying true to your ethics, and being clear about your goals. You can develop your instincts for this by seeking out opportunities for greater positional power (e.g. trustee board roles, or secondments), by shadowing others to understand how these leaders think, and by having a mentor. There is also great value in attending formal structured learning programmes to build a theoretical framework out of your experiences.

For example, many established leaders on our LDPs have really valued the structured learning available on elective programmes. These are a series of half-, one- and two- day specialist topics that people can choose to study in greater depth (e.g. Strategic Thinking for Greater Impact), and these include some accreditation options too. More broadly our programmes have substantially improved participants' influencing skills, with almost every person reporting greater confidence and assertiveness in their roles, and many SU participants reporting that they are more strategic, tactical and integrated in their unions or in their connections with their universities.

The top left quadrant describes **new leaders** – particularly newly appointed chief executives, or those brought in to pioneer entirely new service development areas. These are people who have been propelled into a new leadership role with a great deal of formal power attached to it, who



don't yet have a rich range of leadership experience to draw on. The most acute example of leaders in this position are elected officers in SUs, who are automatically appointed onto the boards of their charities for their periods of office.

While it may be tempting for people in these posts just to adopt a control-and-command leadership style in the hope of getting things done quickly, the cold reality is that these leadership positions are too exposed and lack critical information to be able to make complex unilateral decisions. If they do they risk causing a great deal of resentment in the ranks beneath them – alienating the very people that they rely on to implement their plans.

If you recognise yourself in this leadership role you can maximise your impact by taking a 'helicopter' view, articulating your goals in the wider strategic context that others understand, and by **engaging** the people in your organisation. Foster relations with others so you can genuinely test out your ideas, build consensus for your plans – finding out what works in your charity culture, listening to understand why even your best ideas might not work, and keeping your antennae out for adaptations that would enable your ideas to fly. At this leadership level effective organisational decisions require rich data, robust discussion, and a high level of personal connection.

Newly appointed leaders succeed by being exceptionally curious and learning from their own and others' experience. They develop on the job by using the robust support of an executive coach, or by participating in an action learning set of likeminded peers. This enables them to tackle their essential top-priority tasks and learn in real-time, putting frameworks around their actual experiences so that they come to understand organisational systems and get to develop their situational leadership.

We've already mentioned that coaching is highly valued for these leaders, and in our SU evaluations two thirds of LDP participants also said that their action learning sets particularly contributed to their successes from the programme because they could apply their learning to real-time issues that they knew they had to solve. Participants reported some excellent achievements to benefit their students: improved democracy and representation; major improvements to buildings and allocation of space; and excellent support that enabled presidents and other elected officers to be more effective.

Finally, **established leaders** are described in the top right quadrant. These leaders are at the head of their organisations with a lot of experience under their belts – perhaps career Chief Executives or heads of major departments. They may find themselves playing a field-marshal role: impatiently directing the troops to get the job done as quickly as possible. If they adopted this approach they would miss the opportunity to truly develop the people in their organisations, and would risk fostering a dependency culture. They also risk neglecting their external-facing responsibilities as leaders, and missing out on golden opportunities for their organisations.

As a well-established leader you can maximise your impact by broadening your perspective, extending your reach upwards and outwards whilst **empowering** people in your organisation as much as possible so that they flourish – by sharing your knowledge and experience, delegating extensively, inspiring them to go above and beyond, and enabling them to shine. The more responsibilities they take on, the more it frees you up to foster your ambitions and champion your organisation externally.

You can flourish by stretching yourself, creating a virtuous circle of 'giving back' to your colleagues and to the sector, and enriching yourself in the process. Take on a senior trustee portfolio (such as chair or treasurer) or give yourself intellectual challenges by participating in thought-leadership or by acquiring new analytic tools that help you to be a great strategist. Mentor others too so that you mark your own learning, and commission cross-organisational projects to refresh and grow.



On the SU LDP, the 360 degree feedback confirmed that “thinking systemically and acting long term” is one of the top priority areas that chief executives and senior leaders need to develop. It’s borne out by our evaluation: the biggest barriers to participants making best use of the programme back in their SUs, are time constraints, the culture of fire-fighting which is common to many voluntary organisations, and not having sufficient time to reflect. Our evaluations also demonstrate that senior leaders can really contribute here: what best enables LDP participants to thrive and grow is the fact that their chief executive, senior management team, or line manager is highly supportive, believes in them, and has high expectations of what they can achieve.

We certainly notice that the exceptional high achievers on our programmes are those who are reaching outwards – succeeding personally by getting appointed into more senior posts, and succeeding professionally by steering their organisations through major unanticipated changes, winning new resources for their services, developing service innovations that can be rolled out to other regional offices, and contributing thought leadership for the SU movement or wider voluntary sector.

**James Barrett**  
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James Barrett, Principal Consultant at Cass Business School’s Centre for Charity Effectiveness (Cass CCE), headed up our recent 3 year Leadership Development Programme for permanent staff of students’ unions commissioned by the NUS. He now runs our new two year LDP for the Social Welfare Legal Advice Sector commissioned by The Baring Foundation, and heads up our open access programmes for New and Aspiring Chief Executives.

**We would be fascinated to hear your thoughts about this framework, and your stories about how you have applied it, so do get in touch: [casscce@city.ac.uk](mailto:casscce@city.ac.uk)**