

# Developing Leadership in Public Engagement and Outreach

## Why did we want to talk about this?

There are leaders in outreach and public engagement (OPE) – sometimes we can see them, but not how they got to where they are now. Sometimes they are leading without being recognised or seen as leaders. Some are researchers, championing engagement with research, whilst others are public engagement professionals (PEPs), changing cultures and processes. Leadership can mean leading beyond your authority. This is a position of privilege, and therefore is not a sustainable way of developing future leaders.

This situation is perhaps an indication of the maturity of the OPE sector: that there are leaders and we want more; but also an indication of our immaturity that there are no clear pathways to leadership for OPE.

Several programmes have emerged to respond to this need and they've been popular so we felt it was timely to open up the discussion about OPE Leadership. This document summarises a recent session at the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement's (NCCPE) Unconference in November 2021. The session featured three case study programmes (University of Manchester, Association of Science Discovery Centres, and Ogden/STFC) and a synthesis of key learning from programmes run by the NCCPE.

## What do we mean by leadership?

There are many different models or styles of leadership – from the extreme of charismatic individuals to much more collaborative and inclusive leadership. The programmes in this session all recognised and supported leadership as a means for collaboration, working with others, and 360° influencing, rather than supporting leadership as a lone endeavour.

This reflects the nature of OPE in research and practice settings. That it's an endeavour with many different agendas and drivers, people at all levels can develop a commitment to and leadership of OPE, and that in the specific case of universities, it's still relatively immature as a part of academic identity and university priorities. We also noted that the programmes catered for people who were not necessarily in leadership roles, with job titles that reflected that aspect of their work.

The discussions, and leadership programmes, noted the distinction between leadership and management (both people and project). Noting that leadership is a way of being: it is behavioural, relational, and attitudinal; while management can be more about the technicalities of managing people and projects. In our discussions about OPE leadership we have noted that these are often conflated. Some clarity about the distinctions, and how they apply to OPE leadership in particular, would be productive.

## What is unique about OPE leadership?

The idea of 'leadership as a hierarchy' feels antithetical to the fundamental nature of what we are trying to achieve through public engagement and outreach. With OPE being about democratising knowledge and expertise, this didn't seem to sit well with the concept of leadership. However, the models of leadership that featured in the programmes were more aligned with this fundamental nature of OPE.

Ideas such as service leadership, distributed leadership, and inclusive leadership all featured; this felt more true to the values of OPE than leadership being held by one person at the top of an organisation. As Shaaron Leverment, acting CEO, Association for Science and Discovery Centres, said:

“Leaders are at the heart of their network, not at the top of the pyramid.”

The discussions noted that many OPE leaders, even those with formal recognition in their job title or role description, are positioned with lower institutional power when compared to other university leaders who were ‘engagement reluctant’.

## Key considerations for developing leadership

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Whether you are thinking about your own leadership, or developing a programme for others to participate in, here are some things to consider:

### The outcomes for the leadership programme

As we’ve already noted, we’re not always talking about the same thing. Aside from the distinction between leadership and management we mentioned earlier, leadership can include:

- Culture change within a department, faculty, or university/research organisation
- Engaged research leadership
- Building and sustaining your own personal area of engagement
- Personal growth.

Many of the approaches discussed recognised that lots of leadership programmes don’t badge themselves as such, seeking to grow leadership amongst public engagement and outreach staff in other ways e.g. through co-ordination programmes run as culture change interventions in the HE sector; or the Engage Academy, which focuses on change making.

### Who is the programme for and how do you encourage the ‘right people’ to participate?

The case study programmes and the following discussions noted that you do not already need to be in a leadership role to take part in a leadership development programme. Indeed, we noted that leadership in OPE can be enacted by anyone. However, there was clearly an issue of how people self-identify as being ready to develop into a leadership role. This could be as a personal confidence to claim a leadership title, or because of the existing organisational structures where leadership is formalised, visible, and enacted by a minority of people. To overcome this, the programmes encouraged nominations from senior leaders and colleagues, identifying people who would benefit from the programme but would not readily identify as leaders. We also noted nomination as being important to ensure greater diversity in the people who participate in leadership development programmes. People felt they needed ‘permission’ to claim their leadership and a nomination or recommendation to participate in a leadership programme provided this permission.

## What are the needs of those you are hoping will participate?

Once we know who we are trying to recruit, we need to understand their needs. Think about:

- Their time constraints
- Do they want to develop as leaders in general, or specifically about OPE?
- What institutional support is there for them to draw on in addition to your programme?
- Is the programme available in a timely manner? People look for development opportunities (often) at a time of change or challenge, for example (i) just had a large grant in which public engagement is a factor (ii) new role, (iii) things not going well.

The behavioural and attitudinal aspects of leadership mean that effective professional development needs sustaining. A one-off workshop won't transform a participant into an effective leader! Participants need 'breathing room': time, space, and support to engage with their own personal professional development over time.

## What do leadership programmes look like?

The leadership programmes we heard about had a lot of similarities. They were all cohort programmes and featured:

- Individual & cohort learning
- Mentors to support individual development and provide bespoke advice and experiences to draw on
- Reflective practice
- Access to new ideas through seminars, books, external people, etc.
- Having senior support for participation in the programme
- The creation of inclusive & safe spaces to share experiences, and encourage action
- The development of networks by both the cohort itself (to develop a peer network), and by introduction to others
- Modelling the behaviours and approaches of effective leadership
- Being responsive to participant needs – letting the participants develop their personal sense of leadership that worked for them and their context

The collective content of the programmes covered:

- Leadership styles
- Influencing skills
- How to understand and use institutional levers and resources
- Inclusive leadership
- Understanding your values
- Understanding your existing skill set
- Strategy development
- Overcoming imposter syndrome
- Building confidence
- The emotional nature of leading
- Examining your personal spheres of influence
- Examining the spheres of influence that come with your professional role
- Change making

## Questions we are left with

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### How do we embed leadership development into other work?

These programmes were all stand-alone programmes. We discussed if there was merit in embedding leadership development into things like funding schemes. Noting that some of our current group of OPE leaders have emerged through key investments in public engagement with research culture change and their collective programmes of work.

### What is unique about OPE leadership?

Were there aspects of the programmes that are unique to OPE, or are the programmes straightforward leadership development programmes with an OPE lens? What are the specific skills and capabilities that are unique to OPE leadership? Is there an OPE leadership curriculum?

### Where can we learn from?

There are many leadership programmes from other sectors or programmes e.g. Clore, Common Purpose, Leadership Greater Chicago, Aurora. Where are the best leadership programmes that mirror OPE leadership needs?

### What else can we do to support the development of OPE leadership?

You can do a lot to develop your leadership without going on a programme. We discussed offering to be a mentor to others. There are others – can we collate a list?

## What next?

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When we came together to discuss OPE leadership we were keen to explore how we might take the thinking forward. We are interested in exploring actions that could be taken to enhance support for leaders in OPE. We will be discussing these at the NCCPE Conference at 11am on Wednesday 1 December 2021.

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This report was written by Helen Featherstone and David Owen to summarise the discussions of over 90 attendees at the Engage Unconference session on Tuesday 2 November 2021. The session, titled Leading Public Engagement and Outreach, was convened by Sophie Duncan (NCCPE), Helen Featherstone (University of Bath), Clare Harvey (The Ogden Trust), David Owen (independent) and Charlotte Thorley (independent).