



PELE TRUST LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME

Impact study

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Pele Trust Leadership Programme

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Introduction

Using seed funding from the then North of Tyne Combined Authority, in 2023-24 Newcastle University Educational Leadership Centre (ELC) partnered with Pele Trust in Northumberland to write and deliver a leadership development programme for middle and aspiring leaders from within the trust. The first cohort completed the programme in autumn 2024, following which ELC conducted a mixed methods study (questionnaire, interviews and focus group) to understand the impact of the programme on participants' understanding and practice of leadership within their schools (see Methodology in Appendix A). This report contains the findings of that study.

Key Findings

The findings from all data sets collected in the study showed that the leadership programme has had a tangible and observable positive impact on the leadership awareness and behaviours of all participants. Responses consistently showed that knowledge and understanding of leadership theory and behaviour have improved and that this in turn has positively affected confidence and leadership practice. Several of the participants have since achieved promotions, and both they and the leaders who have interviewed and appointed them, cite the impact of the programme as being a contributing factor in their advancement.

It is evident from their answers that participants were largely unfamiliar with leadership theory at the start of the programme and that they found it to be not only of interest, but also of value as they developed their leadership practice.

Data from the questionnaires showed a very high level of perceived learning and impact, and participants confirmed and expanded on this in the comments within the questionnaire and verbally in the semi-structured interviews. This was further corroborated by senior leaders in a focus group which was held as part of the study.

Findings from the Questionnaire

Nine participants from a cohort of 13 responded to the questionnaire (Appendix B). The questions sought a mixture of scaled and text responses. There were six Likert scale questions within the questionnaire, and the results are demonstrated in the table below. Across all indicators, participants agreed or strongly agreed.

Scale Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree	Questions
0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%	Q2: The programme has developed my knowledge and understanding of leadership
0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%	Q4: The programme has made me more aware of my behaviour as a leader
0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%	Q5: The programme has developed my confidence as a leader
0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%	Q7: The programme has helped me adapt my behaviour as a leader
0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%	Q8: The programme has helped my leadership practices
0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%	Q10: The programme has developed my appreciation and understanding of other leaders

Following the Likert scale questions, participants were asked to justify their scores with text responses. A summary of the text responses with some key examples and quotes is shared below.

Participants identified having a clearer understanding of the differences between management and leadership, and of the values of each, as being a key piece of learning from the programme. They referenced different leadership styles such as transformational, instructional and pedagogical as being relevant to their context and helpful to learn about. Their responses also reflected changes in their own practice and confidence as a result of this learning.

“This leadership development programme has deepened my understanding of leadership by combining theory with discussions around, and then implementation of, practical strategies. I can now distinguish between leadership and management, allowing me to reflect on my strengths and areas for growth. The exploration of leadership theory, especially Kotter, in Session 2 provided a framework to adapt my approach based on different situations. Sessions on vision, communication, and coaching have strengthened my knowledge of building a positive culture, lead

meetings effectively, and support colleagues through mentoring. Overall, the programme has given me greater confidence, clarity, and practical tools to enhance my leadership.”

“The programme has developed my confidence as a leader and my understanding of leadership styles, which style is appropriate to exercise and when to achieve goals and visions. I feel that I have implemented what I have learnt within my practice and there is school wide impact as a result.”

Another key finding from the questionnaire comments was that participants are now more aware of themselves as leaders and of the leadership behaviours of their colleagues. They valued having a name to put to the processes and behaviours they were observing and also having a better understanding of why their own actions and decisions had succeeded or not. They were clear that this new theoretical knowledge would inform the way they plan and communicate with their teams.

“This programme has given me a deeper appreciation of the role and impact of other leaders within the school, particularly other middle and senior leaders. Through reflection, I have recognised how many of their decisions are carefully considered and intentionally made to support both staff and students. Observing their leadership in practice has reinforced the importance of strategic thinking and the need to balance immediate priorities with long-term goals.”

“The reflection time has been brilliant to review leaders I have worked with and the placements in different schools and speaking to other leaders was an excellent opportunity.”

“Analysing my own strengths and areas for development as a leader has significantly improved my leadership style over the last academic year. Understanding the demands and difficulties within leadership roles has helped me to communicate more effectively with my team and helped me to see a variety of perspectives.”

“This course has allowed me to review myself as a leader and has given me thought for what I do and why. Is it effective or could it be better? I have changed the way I communicate with my team members and how I distribute key pieces of information.”

“I feel like the events, activities and projects that I have been leading on have been successful but now I understand more about why that is. I can also see with hindsight examples where my leadership may not have been as good and why that is.”

Participants identified several practical applications covered on the programme which had quickly been of value in their leadership. These often centred around communication and handling challenging conversations. Planning in advance, thinking about the evidence to be used, and considering the timing and setting of these meetings were all cited as beneficial learning, as well as the content on coaching and mentoring. There was a perceived link between these different strategies, since coaching and mentoring may be techniques which could help a difficult conversation to be successful.

“A relational approach to leadership is definitely where I sit in terms of my own preferred style, learning the difference between mentoring and coaching and when to use different styles has been particularly helpful when supporting an under-performing member of my team.”

“I have adapted my leadership practice by using evidence to inform decision-making and guide team discussions. Whether leading meetings or providing feedback, I now rely more on data and concrete examples to support my reasoning. This approach has made my communication clearer, more structured, and ultimately more effective in driving meaningful change.”

“I ensure that I take the time to talk more rather than bombarding e-mails. I ensure that staff have the opportunity to do things too rather than having control of everything.”

“In relation to Fisher’s Personal Transition Curve, I have become more aware of and empathetic to how others respond to change.”

All participants were able to specify aspects of their leadership which had improved as a result of attending the programme, and none identified gaps or problems or disagreed with any of the statements.

The key themes that emerged from the text responses centred around how the new theoretical knowledge they had gained, such as leadership versus management, leadership styles, coaching and mentoring, deepening their own understanding and awareness of their own and others leadership behaviours, such as confidence, communication and conducting challenging conversations.

The questionnaire responses were then used to develop the specific questions use in the semi-structured interviews, in order to seek greater depth and individual specificity within these areas.

Findings from the Semi-Structured Interviews

Five participants took part in a follow-up interview to the questionnaire, which took place online. Thematic analysis of their responses highlighted several key impacts of the programme on participants’ leadership:

- Increased Confidence
- Understanding Leadership Styles
- Enhanced Strategic Thinking and Planning
- Differentiating Coaching and Mentoring
- Handling Difficult Conversations
- Building Positive Culture
- Application of Leadership Theories
- Reflective Practice

Participants said that they felt **more confident** in their leadership practice once they understood the theory behind their actions. Knowing the research and principles behind leadership decisions reassured them that they were on the right track and helped them understand why certain approaches worked well in particular situations. Responses show that the programme has helped participants distinguish between **different leadership styles** and understand when to apply each one. This included recognising the importance of being both assertive and collaborative depending on the situation.

Participants also said that they had learned to balance long-term and short-term goals more effectively, and that they have begun to recognise the importance of **setting a clear vision** and creating actionable steps to achieve their and the team's objectives. Understanding leadership theory has allowed participants to make more informed, collaborative and strategic decisions, and they stated that they could analyse situations better, consider multiple perspectives, and apply appropriate leadership styles based on the context.

"In my interview [for a new role] I referred to the vision for [the curriculum area] that I had, but also I talked about the vision that I would like to have for my key stage and leading my phase ... really developing where you want to go with that and setting out a shared vision to give us some sort of identity. I guess I really found that useful."

"...the strategic management decisions that I can make and basically how a lot of them can be research and evidence based and then using that to come up with a solution. I now understand that it is important for leaders to be collaborative as well when they're making their decisions, not just universal ones."

The content on **coaching, mentoring** and **handling difficult conversations** was mentioned repeatedly by all of the participants. The programme provided the opportunity to examine strategies for managing difficult conversations, including the importance of evidence-based discussions, active listening and empathy, which participants confirmed that they felt better equipped to address performance issues and provide constructive feedback. Those who have used this learning stated that it has led to more constructive and less confrontational interactions, and that as a result, relationships and team dynamics have improved. The distinction between coaching and mentoring was clarified, and participants learned how to apply these approaches effectively. They practised coaching using the GROW model, focusing on guiding colleagues to find their own solutions rather than providing answers directly, and understanding when to move into a mentoring role instead.

"I feel much more prepared now to have those difficult conversations or to coach somebody through things. Whereas previously, I would have had zero experience of that."

"I think the key thing is about going into difficult conversations with evidence ... that's really been one of the key things that I've learned. But also, having professional empathy for how the other person might react and so on."

“Anytime I have to have a difficult conversation now, I ask myself ‘what’s my evidence?’ ‘How am I going to actively listen’.”

“Prior to doing the course, I hadn’t really thought about the difference between coaching and mentoring. But then since doing the course, I am more aware of what situation would require a bit more of a coaching approach of working with them, helping them to see the answer, what the issues are, what the answers could be and so on. But equally, sometimes it does need to be a bit more mentoring. So, it very much depends upon the situation.”

Throughout their responses participants referred to their improved approach to communication as a result of taking part in the programme. They understood better the effect on team morale and **culture** of planning conversations and collaborating over decision making, and of thinking about the audience before holding conversations.

“Prior to doing the course, I don’t think I’d ever properly thought about the distinction between leadership and management and the kind of the impact that that understanding can have on yourself, but also on those around you... I think through doing the programme, I’ve taken a step back, I’ve analysed how my culture and how my ethos impacts others, and the role and the influence that I can have.”

Specific **leadership theories and models**, such as Kotter’s (1995) Eight Steps for Change, Goleman’s (2000) leadership styles and Brookfield’s (1995) lenses, were frequently mentioned as useful tools. These models provide structured approaches for implementing change, building relationships, and viewing situations from different perspectives: participants found these models practical and applicable in their day-to-day roles. They also commented on how it helped them to see the importance of sustaining, not just implementing, change.

“...understanding how that person works and where their thoughts and feelings might be coming from, has been really important, because I remember we looked at a bit of research, I think it was Fisher, and the transitional curve. Basically, it showed how different people will react to different changes at different points. So even though I’d set that initial vision and culture, I couldn’t then expect everybody to be at the same point on that roller coaster diagram, essentially. I realise it’s about building relationships and being really aware of their strengths and weaknesses, so I can then go forward with that.”

Participants said that knowing leadership theory had encouraged them to reflect on their own practices and continuously improve. They said that they regularly revisited their session notes and applied the concepts to refine their strategies. This **ongoing reflection** has helped them to stay aligned with best practice and adapt to new challenges.

In corroboration with the questionnaire data, it is clear from the interview responses that the programme has had a significant impact on participants' leadership understanding and that they have gained skills and knowledge which are being used in their leadership practice.

Findings from the Senior Leaders Focus Group

Senior leaders working in the participants' schools were invited to take part in a focus group to help determine whether the participants' self-reported learning and development were reflected in their leadership behaviour. All responses confirmed that participants were more confident in their roles, that they were more reflective and showed better understanding of their leadership role. Senior leaders cited seeing improved modelling of leadership behaviour, better coping strategies when under pressure and perceptible enthusiasm for leadership among the participants. Those who had been on interview panels commented on how strong the performances were from those who had been on the programme in comparison with other candidates. Participants had come back from sessions enthused, encouraging others to attend the programme and demonstrated greater clarity about their own intended leadership journey. For one participant the headteacher stated that it had been transformational.

“One person in particular [who has been on the programme], their general leadership behaviour has been really positively improved by it. And that then has had a bit of a ripple effect in terms of ... culture and so on.”

Collective Findings

All three methods used in the study – questionnaire, interviews and focus group – corroborated the key areas of impact. Participants scored themselves as being more knowledgeable about leadership theory and practice and as a result feeling more confident in their leadership: specific examples of the effect of this increased confidence appeared in text answers, interviews and the focus group. All three methods showed that participants' leadership behaviour had changed and developed, and that they are more aware and assured as leaders. Qualitative data suggesting deeper knowledge of theory was supported in the interviews and focus group responses, by specific reference to particular models and theories such as Goleman, Kotter, and Fisher's Personal Transition Curve. Claims that practical modelling of effective practice had altered participants' own practice were substantiated by examples such as using coaching and mentoring more effectively and handling challenging conversations with better success. The synergy between the three strands of evidence, and the exemplification and specificity supporting the quantitative data, enable us to be confident in our conclusion regarding the impact of the programme.

Conclusion

Our conclusion is that this programme has had a meaningful and positive impact on participants' leadership knowledge, understanding and confidence. They are more skilled in carrying out leadership tasks and more reflective about what leadership is and how it can be done well. They have developed their understanding of the importance of the use of evidence in addressing underperformance or planning for change, and they express appreciation of the models and

techniques which were covered in the programme. They also understand better the leadership within their own schools and the wider trust. Some have already moved on to more senior roles, and this programme is cited as having helped them to be ready for a prepare for these promotions.

Key ingredients for the success of this programme stemmed from the initial planning meetings, which enabled Educational Leadership Centre to ensure that the contents met the requirements and context of the trust. Participants and senior leaders all stated that the pace, scheduling, and balance of theory to practice enabled participants to engage fully with the programme and manage the learning alongside their jobs. The trust's careful selection of participants and their support in enabling them to have time out of school, as well as facilitating the school placements, were also crucial. Several participants commented that having reflection time within the sessions was also invaluable, as it allowed them to absorb more fully, and also plan how to use what they had learned.

References

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- Goleman, D. (2000). Leadership that gets results. *Harvard Business Review*, 78, 78-90
- Fisher, J. (2012). Process of Personal Transition. <https://www.businessballs.com/change-management/personal-change-stages-john-fisher/>

Appendix A

Methodology

Participants

A total of nine participants responded to an initial questionnaire, from a cohort of 13, all of whom work for the same Multi Academy Trust. From this group, five participants took part in follow-up semi-structured interviews. A separate focus group was conducted with 10 participants, who all directly supervised or worked closely with the programme participants.

Design

This study employed a mixed methods design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore the impact of the leadership development programme on participants' knowledge, understanding and leadership behaviour. Data was collected using a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group. This mixed methods approach was selected to provide both breadth and depth of understanding. The questionnaire offered a broad overview of participants' perceptions and allowed for the collection of measurable data, while the open-ended responses and follow-up interviews enabled more detailed exploration of individual experiences. The inclusion of a focus group with senior leaders added a valuable additional perspective, allowing for triangulation and comparison between self-reported development and externally observed changes in leadership practice.

Procedure

Firstly, informed consent was obtained, and the study was approved by Newcastle University's ECLS ethics committee. Participants were initially recruited by distributing an online questionnaire to the full cohort of educators who had completed a school leadership development programme. The questionnaire was created using Microsoft forms and included a combination of closed-ended (i.e., Likert scale) items and open-ended free-text questions. These questions aimed to capture participants' initial reflections on the leadership programme, including perceived changes in leadership knowledge, confidence, and practice. All participants who completed the questionnaire indicated willingness to take part in an interview, and five ultimately completed the interview process.

Each interview was conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 30-40 minutes. With the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded, and software provided by Zoom and Glean were used to transcribe these recordings. Prior to the interview, the researcher reviewed each participant's questionnaire responses to identify any gaps, ambiguities, or points of interest. These were used to tailor the interview questions, allowing the conversation to build directly on the individual's earlier responses.

Following the interviews, a focus group was held with senior leaders who held supervisory roles over the staff who had participated in the leadership development programme. These individuals were invited to provide their perspectives on any observed changes in leadership behaviour or school impact. The focus group guide was developed using the questionnaire data and qualitative responses were presented to the group as a basis of discussion.

Data analysis

The qualitative data collected from the five semi-structured interviews, and one focus group were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outline by Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts were initially reviewed to ensure accuracy and were then coded inductively to identify patterns of meaning across participants' accounts.

To support the analysis, AI-assisted tools (Copilot) were used to support in the initial coding and theme development. The researcher reviewed and refined these AI-generated codes, combining and collapsing them where appropriate. Through this process, eight **overarching themes** were identified, capturing participants' perceptions of the leadership development programme and they formed the basis for interpretation and discussion. These themes were:

- Increased Confidence
- Understanding Leadership Styles
- Strategic Thinking and Planning
- Coaching and Mentoring
- Handling Difficult Conversations
- Building Positive Culture
- Application of Leadership Theories
- Reflective Practice

Appendix B

Questionnaire

Pele Trust Leadership Programme Impact Study

The purpose of this questionnaire is:

- To understand the impact on participants' leadership learning, behaviour and practice;
- To understand the effectiveness of the short course PD programme model for participants and the Trust.

As a reminder, please find a list of the sessions included below:

Session 1: What is Leadership?

- Defining leadership and management
- Identifying the key features of effective leadership

Session 2: Exploring leadership theory

- Introducing key leadership theory
- Exploring the practical application of leadership theory

Session 3: Building Teams and Managing People 1 - Vision and culture

- Creating a vision
- Building a culture

Session 4: Building Teams and Managing People 2 - Communication

- Defining effective communication
- Holding difficult conversations
- Leading effective meetings

Session 5: Building Teams and Managing People 3 - Coaching and mentoring

- Understanding the similarities and differences
- Exploring different coaching models
- Using coaching and mentoring to build the team

Session 6: Leading for change 1 - Identifying the issue and designing the solution

- Exploring evidence collection and analysis
- Enquiry models

Session 7: Leading for Change 2 - Implementing change

- Exploring change models
- Applying theory to implementation practice

* Required

1. Declaration of Consent

Please check the box below if you consent to participating in this study:

- ☐ I agree to participate in this study, the purpose of which is to assess the impact of short course leadership programmes for teachers
- ☐ I declare that I have understood the nature and purpose of the research.
- ☐ I have read the participant information sheet and understand the information provided.
- ☐ I have been informed that I may decline to answer any questions or withdraw from the study without penalty of any kind.
- ☐ I have been informed that all of my responses will be kept confidential and secure, and that I will not be identified in any report or other publication resulting from this research.
- ☐ I have been informed that the researchers may wish to share non-identifying information, e.g., my responses to questions, in a public repository. I understand that it will not be possible to identify me as an individual from this information alone.
- ☐ I have been informed that the investigator will answer any questions regarding the study and its procedures. The investigator's email

is stephanie.bingham@newcastle.ac.uk and they can be contacted via email or by telephone on 0191 208 8455.

- I will be provided with a copy of this form for my records.

We will also hold a focus group of senior leaders to discuss their perception of the findings from the online questionnaires and interviews. The findings will be shared with a group of leaders as assimilated group findings, not as individual responses to individual leaders, thus protecting anonymity of participants.

*

☒ Yes, I consent to participating in this study

2. The programme has developed my knowledge and understanding of leadership

Strongly agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Knowledge and Understanding

☐

3. Please provide further detail to explain your response to question 2 *

i.e., In what ways, if any, has this programme has developed your knowledge and understanding as a leader?

4. The programme has made me more aware of my behaviour as a leader *

Strongly agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Awareness

☐

☐

☐

☐

5. The programme has developed my confidence as a leader *

Strongly agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Confidence

6. Please provide further detail to explain your response to question 4 and 5 *

i.e., In what ways, if any, has this programme changed your self-awareness and confidence as a leader?

7. The programme has helped me adapt my behaviour as a leader *

Strongly agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Behaviour



8. The programme has developed my leadership practices *

(e.g., how I make decisions, conduct meetings, deal with team members, plan and collaborate)

Strongly agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Practice



9. Please provide further detail to explain your response to question 7 and 8 *

i.e., In what ways, if any, has this programme changed your leadership behaviour and practice? What have you done differently in your day to day practice?

10. The programme has developed my appreciation and understanding of other leaders *

Strongly agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Other leaders

11. Please provide further detail to explain your response to question 10 *

i.e., In what ways, if any, have you developed your appreciation and understanding of other leaders

12. In what ways, if any, do you plan to apply your learning from this programme in your future practice? *

13. In addition to this questionnaire, we would like to interview participants. Therefore, if you are willing to be interviewed, please check the box below and ensure you have included your name and email address below. *

Yes, I am willing to be interviewed for the purpose of this study

14. Name (optional)

15. Email address (optional)