

How Far Can a Short Leadership and Management Programme Address the Challenges for First Line Social Work Managers? An Evaluation of One of the Skills for Care Leadership and Management Demonstration Sites

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Abstract

This article describes the evaluation of a leadership and management training programme for first line social work managers, focussing on safeguarding. The programme was developed alongside local authority partners and included both children's and adult services managers. The evaluation, carried out with funding from Skills for Care, used a multi-level evaluation framework, adapted from Kirkpatrick by one of the authors previously. The evaluation demonstrated value to the candidates in terms of enhanced learning and changes in behaviour, in particular strengthening leadership and management skills, decision making and confidence in safeguarding. Candidates had an increased level of confidence in carrying out their managerial roles, and particularly appreciated the opportunity to reflect on practice and spend time exploring issues around safeguarding and risk. Feedback from candidates' line managers, although limited, confirmed the benefits of the course to staff. Comparison is made with published evaluations of similar short leadership and management courses and the value of such courses recognised.

Keywords

Social work, leadership, management, safeguarding

Introduction

Within the last decade a number of factors in the UK have combined to place the leadership and management of social work services under increasing scrutiny and the target for policy directed change. Serious case reviews have identified a shortfall in the safeguarding of vulnerable adults and children (Manthorpe and Martineau, 2011), exemplified in the cases of Steven Hoskin (Flynn, 2007, and 2009), Gemma Hayter (Warwickshire County Council 2010) and Peter Connolly (London Borough of Haringey, 2009) among others (NSPCC, 2014). Integration of services is seen as the way forward. In children's services this has occurred with education through the Children Act, 2004, and in adults and mental health, integration between health and social care is seen as the way forward (Department of Health, 2014; Clifton and Thorley 2014). Recent reports by Narey (2014) and Croisdale-Appleby (2014) have reinforced the need for more effective leadership within the social work profession as a whole.

Policies related to the public involvement agenda also raise the need for leadership for contemporary care delivery. In 2007, “Putting People First” suggested that “Every locality should seek to have a community based support system, focussed on the health and wellbeing of the local population, binding together local Government, primary care, community based health provision, public health (and) social care” (Department of Health, 2007, 2). This major policy initiative suggested a cultural change would be required, indicating the need for “leadership that propels change and improvement” (Fauth and Mahdon, 2007), orientating services to the demands of customers (Watson, 2008). The Care Act 2014 reinforces this trend, requiring local authorities to carry out their care and support functions by integrating services with the NHS and other agencies (Guardian, May 19th 2014; Department of Health 2014). Additionally, for social work leaders, personalisation of services and a drive to enable service users to take more control over their own lives, has placed departments and the managers within them subject to increasing levels of scrutiny and sanction (Dustin, 2007; Scourfield 2007; Lawler and Bilson 2010).

In the midst of these policy influences the challenge of how to lead and manage social workers more effectively has collided with a continuing reform agenda to enhance the status and impact of social work as a profession (Laming, 2009; Munro, 2010, 2011; Narey 2014; Croisdale-Appleby 2014) whilst increasing the interdisciplinarity of the contexts in which social work is practised. While Serious Case Reviews have emphasised the need for improved communication and multiagency working, the Social Work Task Force recognised that it was social work team managers (rather than other professionals) who were faced with particularly complex safeguarding issues (Social Work Task Force, 2009). Simultaneously the Children’s Workforce Development Council (now defunct) and Skills for Care focused on funding initiatives to support “The development of a coherent, deliverable and high quality social work management learning programme thatwill benefit social work managers, social workers and people who use their services” (Skills for Care Tender document, 2010). Currently the College of Social Work cites Leadership as one of its pathways to advanced social worker status (The College of Social Work, no date).

The development of the programme

In order to realise the management development agenda outlined above, six local authorities worked together with a partner university to design and deliver an integrated Leadership, Management and Safeguarding training programme for adult and children’s services managers. The establishment of a development group provided an underpinning of the programme with an effective partnership between employing organisations and the educational institution (Rounce et al, 2007; Watson, 2008). The local authority members of the group consulted with their respective practitioners and managers, and reached consensus that the content of the programme needed to include:

- Safeguarding from a manager’s perspective
- Supervision and supporting staff in situations of conflict and denial from service users

- Service user perspectives on receiving services
- Managing self-directed support and the personalisation agenda: empowerment in the context of safeguarding
- Leadership behaviour within safeguarding and supervisory processes
- Learning from national and local issues highlighted by Safeguarding Boards
- Managing change and sustaining services

Because adults and children’s social work services are commissioned differently with health holding responsibility for certain areas of adult social work e.g. mental health, the need to work in partnership particularly in respect of the safeguarding agenda, was deemed increasingly important (Bailey 2012). For this reason the programme reflected an emphasis on managers being able to:

- Manage themselves, manage and lead others and the service
- Achieve a balance between leading and developing people and ensuring that the tasks of the team are completed
- Interface effectively between their team, the organisation to which they belong and other teams/networks that interlink to provide a service including collaboration with service users

This required the training to be more ‘applied’ than standard leadership and management courses which some managers had accessed previously. This focus was congruent with lessons to be learned about leadership from serious case reviews (Fish et al 2008; Laming 2009, Munro 2010, and Manthorpe and Martineau 2011).

This paper evaluates the programme after three cohorts and explores how far such training can address the challenges of the political and professional agenda for first line social work managers.

Structure and content of the course

The programme was offered as one 30 credit module within a post qualifying suite of social work continuing professional development (CPD) modules at Masters level. The 6 day course ran twice in 2011 (April and September 2011) and in September 2012. The teaching took place over an 8 week period, with a further four weeks for candidate reflection and writing the final assignment. Table 1 describes the breakdown in activity and content.

Table 1: Course timeline including content and activity across sessions

Evaluation framework and methodology

The initial Skills for Care funding was secured on a proposed evaluation framework using a tried and tested approach (Bailey 2002a, 2002b and 2007). Bailey's framework combines context and input level evaluation proposed by Warr et al (1970) with an evaluation of outcomes (Kirkpatrick 1994 and Barr 2000) that included managers' reactions to the training through to changes in their learning and behaviour. Bailey and Littlechild (2001) identify that in evaluating educational programmes it is helpful to establish whether it is the process (the educational programme itself) or the outcome (eventual changes in practice) that are being evaluated. This clarification proved useful as from the first cohort we considered subsequent changes in managers' behaviour by utilising interview data at 6 months follow-up and line manager interviews. For the second two cohorts Skills for Care funding for the evaluation had ceased so Candidates were evaluated simply on their reactions to the training they received (reaction level evaluation) in terms of whether the course met its aims.

The focus of this paper is to explore the evaluation of outcomes for candidates and the impact of the course for them on managing their teams (See Table 2 below).

Data collection and analysis

As well as satisfying Skills for Care's requirements, we wanted to ensure that any findings could be incorporated into ongoing course planning. Amalgamating the evaluation strategies allowed us to "put the course 'under the spotlight', to reflect upon whether it is addressing the training needs identified and also to identify any improvements that can be made to enhance future delivery" (Bailey 2002a, 567).

Qualitative methods are important for establishing the value of a particular programme for the Candidates. The main part of this paper draws on the outcome level dataset (Warr et al 1970) mapped across to the three corresponding Kirkpatrick levels (see below) across three consecutive cohorts.

Table 2: Leadership, Management and Safeguarding course data collection and analysis using a multi-level evaluation framework developed by Bailey (2002 and 2007)

The most comprehensive dataset was achieved with cohort 1, with a range of data that captured the context (planning and implementation of the course). Data from cohorts 2 and 3 were used to show how the course developed from its initial design/inputs, in response to candidate feedback.

At cohort 1, data consisted of:

- Evaluation forms completed by 83% of candidates (15 of 18) immediately after course completion (reaction level evaluation)

- Interviews with 50% of candidates (9 of 18), approximately six months after course completion (reported behaviour change and learning, and knowledge and skills development)
- Interviews with 2 candidates' line managers (observed impact of the training on candidates' behaviour)

At cohort 2, 14 evaluation forms were completed from a total of 21 candidates from the course, and from cohort 3, 13 evaluation forms were returned from a possible 16 providing more detailed evaluation data on inputs. Data collection and candidate involvement was based on an opportunistic sample throughout the evaluation. The number of evaluation forms returned across each cohort is illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: Questionnaire data

A grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) was used to analyse the qualitative data (interviews, written feedback on evaluation forms and focus group data). Data was read and re-read by two of the researchers and subsequently grouped using a thematic analysis (Denscombe, 2003). Themes were categorised into the areas of Bailey's evaluation framework.

Table 4: Emerging Themes

Emerging themes

1 Learning (Acquisition of knowledge and skills)

Sharing practice & peer support

Candidates shared the view that being on the course with individuals from different localities and services increased their knowledge of social work practice operating in other contexts. Candidates valued the perspectives and experience of others, learned from their peers and shared their issues. There was a sense of peer support and collaboration.

I thoroughly enjoyed taking myself out of it, talking to other managers, talking with service managers, and seeing how other areas and other divisions are managing the safeguarding issues. Whether that was with adults or with children - it all contributed to management styles *Children's services candidate*

The session led by the service user added value through demonstrating the impact of their work in a wider context.

There was an advocate from adults in social services who was marvellous, and there were people who came in to share their stories of homelessness and experience of abuse in childhood and difficult systems managing. That had a really profound effect on me as part of that course.' *Children's services candidate*

Reflective time

Candidates appreciated the opportunity to take time out from their role to reflect on practice. Candidates were directed to current issues which encouraged a reflection on their ways of working.

The thing that I enjoyed the most about the course was the opportunity to have some time and space, be directed to some recent research or information and reports, and reflect on those and think about them in the context of the work I'm doing. *Children's services candidate*

Increased knowledge

Candidates gained knowledge from the course in areas such as research, practice theory and safeguarding.

I feel that the course has armed me with knowledge. It has provided me with up to date knowledge that is clear and concise, that can be used with un-motivated or difficult staff. *Children's services candidate*

Candidates reported that the knowledge they had acquired in relation to issues such as safeguarding had potential to be used in the workplace.

We go on lots of management courses, but what I think this one particularly gave was that link to safeguarding. This course was specific to safeguarding so it gave me those additional elements of the safeguarding aspect and the leadership style we adopt, particularly within the youth offending services around safeguarding. *Children's services candidate*

The knowledge also provided candidates with up to date research and theories in order to inform practice.

One of the articles just reinforced the importance of carrying people with you. So I decided after reading that article that within the team meeting it was time to do a recognition session. People had achieved different things over the past 6 months so I bought everyone a primrose from the market and we had an award ceremony where it highlighted what people had done and the achievements they had accomplished. That was a direct response from reading the articles. It gave me a push to do that. *Children's services candidate*

2 Changes in behaviour

Candidates reported a number of behavioural outcomes. There was a clear impact on practice, and in addition candidates said they had improved their skills relating to confidence, reflection, listening and questioning.

Impact on practice

Candidates reported that the course was thought-provoking, informative and offered ways to incorporate new ideas into practice. Through taking a reflective step back, candidates identified areas for improvement on current practice. The following example highlighted a new strategy that one candidate had taken for approaching team meetings.

I think talking about the serious case reviews on the course was useful because one of the things that I think we do very well is trying to incorporate research. Probably an indirect link to the course is that I've asked the team (in their team meeting) to spend 15 or 20 minutes talking about research and how they can use that research in their practice and in their analysis *Children's services candidate*

Confidence

Candidates reported increased confidence in practice, ability, and challenging others.

Skilling myself up in terms of asking and challenging organisations about why they have not done what they said they were going to do. Challenging staff on what they've done because it's easy to say 'so and so hasn't done this or that'. So I'd now ask 'what have you done in place to safeguard that young person *Children's services candidate*

The following example highlighted the knock on effects of the increase in confidence.

I was confident as a line manager managing my own profession but it gave me the confidence to line manage other staff as well. *Adult services candidate*

The increase in candidate confidence was reiterated by the managers of candidates, which reinforced the impact of the course on candidates' confidence for undertaking new challenges.

Since my candidate has attended the course she has engaged in audit activity of cases across other teams which she had not previously undertaken. Her increased knowledge gave her the confidence to undertake the task well. *Candidate's line manager*

Reflection

Candidates regarded the course as a 'valuable opportunity to reflect on own supervision style' *Questionnaire response*, and learned 'the importance for space and time for reflection on day to day work' *Questionnaire response*, with some indicating that reflection had been applied back into the workplace.

Candidates reflected on work and on skills. The idea of taking a step back from everyday practice in order to reflect was considered a great opportunity.

I think I'm a reflector anyway. But now I think I reflect differently and more in-depth because of the course. The supervision role play really made me examine how I provide supervision in terms of whether it is meaningful, or whether it is just one of those things that you have to do. And what staff actually get out of it- if they are not going without getting anything, well is there any point? *Children's services candidate*

Reflection had been a tool that candidates had since tried to implement in both their own work and in the practice of their staff for example in supervision and team meetings.

I think for me it was much more about using evidence based practice in the workplace but also looking at supervision of staff and critically reflective supervision to try to improve practice. What I've encouraged is that within the team meeting process teams to look at things in depth and use reflection on those cases to look at how things could have improved. We very much try to foster a culture of trying to move away from the blame culture to looking at how we can do things differently and learn from the processes that we are engaged in and the families that we work with. *Children's services candidate*

Listening

Listening skills had improved for candidates, both on a general level through listening more in-depth to staff, and on a specific level in supervision sessions.

You don't realise that you don't (listen) until you do courses and examine your management style more in-depth. Whilst I did think I listened to staff, I think I listen far more now. *Children's services candidate*

I suppose the biggest thing for me was actually listening more instead of offering solutions, actually passing it back to the person I am supervising and asking what they see, coming to a level playing field. *Adult services candidate*

Questioning

Candidates had indicated that questioning skills and techniques had improved, to ensure the right questions would be asked in the future.

We'll now ask questions differently or ask more questions in some areas. To draw on some of those areas that have probably been missed out on this particular case that we discussed as part of supervision on the role play. So I think that was really interesting and it developed that skill. *Children's services candidate*

3 Leadership

In terms of changes in leadership skills (Kirkpatrick's Results category) three key elements were demonstrated. There was a strengthening in leadership and management skills, decision making skills and confidence in safeguarding.

Leadership & Management

The course strengthened leadership and management skills and provided reassurance to candidates regarding their performance, which fulfilled an overall aim of the course.

Here I am line managing a multi-disciplinary team. I find that it has confirmed that for me as a manager you are manager for whoever you are managing, whether that is the profession that you are most knowledgeable about. There are certain skills that you can use generically. *Adult services candidate*

The course equipped candidates to make the distinction between leadership and management aspects of their role. One candidate learned to 'remember that leadership is about people and management is about process.' *Questionnaire response*

I think it did make me get my head out of the operational side and think that I do need to lead the team as well as just managing them operationally. *Adult services candidate*

The programme was also especially useful for teaching about forming a team and dynamics within a team, as well as about supervision styles.

It was useful for understanding the dynamics of a new team because we did a lot of team dynamics in terms of helping to identify people's learning styles, as it varies quite drastically from person to person in terms of what works for them. *Adult services candidate*

The increase in candidate confidence as a manager was further reiterated by the managers of candidates.

I have noticed that the candidate is a more confident manager and is able to challenge partners and colleagues in an evidence based fashion ensuring that she keeps the safeguarding needs of CYP central to the discussion. *Candidates line manager*

Decision making

The course aided candidates with decision making in practice, with both formal and informal decision making processes, as well as helping with the recording of decisions.

I've said to a member of staff if an inspector came and looked at that case and asked why you made that decision, is it clear from your notes how and why you came to that decision. I think that's what we need to be thinking about. *Children's services candidate*

Safeguarding

The course equipped candidates with new knowledge around safeguarding and demonstrated areas in which practice needed to be improved in relation to safeguarding practices.

One thing it shouted to me is that we need to communicate with each other about this. A lot of the serious case reviews told us to not assume that somebody else is doing a job. We need to talk inter-agency, which is something that is being addressed, so across the police, ambulance services, all agencies. *Adult services candidate*

Managers emphasised the increase in knowledge their candidates had gained about safeguarding and the impact this had on their practice. Two candidates had used their newly acquired knowledge through conducting training sessions about safeguarding.

My candidate was making good use of the learning from the course share knowledge, skills and expectations around safeguarding practice within a team whose primary focus was not on safeguarding issues on a day to day basis. My candidate managed to make sure that a safeguarding approach needs to be at the heart of decision making, analysis and judgments that staff in the service make – they can be experts. This was very effective in breaking down myths and building worker confidence as well as emphasising compliance with correct procedures. *Candidate's line manager*

My candidate has been at the fore front of a more creative way of working and has led some complex safeguarding training on specific topics to Independent Chairs in the region's safeguarding unit. The feedback from staff was very positive and the training well received. *Candidate's line manager*

Discussion

21st century leaders and managers in social work find themselves in charge of services that increasingly reflect a mixed economy of care spanning the statutory, private and independent or voluntary sectors, with a growing contribution from service users and their families through informal support networks. Managers need to be competent and confident. This is equally the case in children's services.

The data from this evaluation indicated that bringing different services together for the training was a positive step as it was evident that much was gained for candidates from this. Adult services managers learnt from children's services where safeguarding procedures have been embedded for longer; however children's services managers valued the experience of adults' services where managers frequently led large and professionally diverse teams. There was a rich interchange of information and ideas and candidates were reassured in their work as they realised that other managers experienced the same or similar challenges as themselves. For many candidates comfort was taken from the realisation that the 'grass is not greener' in a different locality or in a different service.

Using only data from the Candidates themselves and their managers could be regarded as unreliable because of the difficulty of replicating results (Kazi, 2003). Also in terms of acquired knowledge and skills and changes in behaviour we were reliant on candidates' self-reported changes although we did make an attempt to triangulate this by seeking feedback from candidates' line managers in cohort 1. It is therefore useful to have available evaluations carried out by McAllan and Macrae (2010) and Keen et al (2013). These both relate to leadership and management programmes similar to this one, and provide an empirical evaluation of such programmes. Up to now this has been rare, as indeed has evaluation of post qualifying social work programmes more generally (Carpenter, 2011, Brown et al, 2008). The

courses described by these authors were short courses aimed at managers working within the field of social work and both found a significant change in behaviour indicated at the end of their programmes (McAllan and Macrae, 2010, Keen et al, 2013). Managing a social work team with a safeguarding remit is a highly skilled and responsible task. The emphasis on safeguarding for both adults and children's services managers in this course allowed Candidates to address the nuts and bolts of these issues which can at times worry them. Meeting with others, sharing experiences and having time to reflect with professionals in the same role was highly valued. The wealth of interview data at the 6 month follow-up provided empirical evidence of the value of the programme, confirming the findings of Keen et al (2013).

Conducting interviews with candidates' line managers proved more problematic than expected. Several candidates had interim managers who changed during or after the course, so were unable to comment on changes in behaviour; others were very hard to engage, and eventually it was only possible to conduct interviews with two line managers. Although agencies had paid for their managers to participate in the course, there seemed to be a noticeable lack of interest in the outcome. This reflects findings by Rounce (2007) concerning a similar programme. It was unfortunate that it was so difficult to get feedback from senior managers, because it would have indicated the impact in terms of the candidates themselves, and also demonstrated that the candidates were working in an environment where their learning was valued and absorbed into the wider organisation.

One of the key issues in social work education is service user involvement, which is embedded in qualifying social work education and is mandatory in all aspects of selection and training (Department of Health, 2002). Bailey (2012) provides an example of how service users and managers came together to develop management training for collaborative practice in mental health, and on this programme in order to mirror such practice the development group invited a service user group, to take part in the development and delivery of the course. The service user group brought rich personal accounts to the teaching delivery, and the evaluation data from cohort one indicated this had a powerful effect for candidates. There is little research evaluating the outcomes of service user involvement in social work education (Matka et al, 2010), but Beresford and Croft suggest one of the successes of the service user movement overall has been "developing social models and understanding of service users situations and experiences" (Beresford and Croft, 2004); thus one of the aims was to remind managers what it felt like to be a service user, not just in accessing services but in their lives as whole. The relevance of this to a management course was questioned by some Candidates, but the rating of the involvement of service users in the training programme improved over the three cohorts.

A further key point from the data related to the knowledge candidates' gained in relation to supervision. Supervision materialised as a key area in which improvements had been made. Not only had candidates learned about the process of supervision, they reflected on their current approach and in some cases incorporated change (Ward, 2013). They were also able to explore their feelings about the supervision they received, and what they should expect from their own managers.

It has become relatively commonplace for adult services teams to be managed within a multi disciplinary framework, with the manager being a non – social worker; this is less common in children’s services. It has been suggested that the tasks in adult social work have been reduced to such a mechanistic process that the skills of a social worker are no longer required (Lymbery, 2006). However, developing this course in the context of adult safeguarding, studying the adult serious case reviews for the purpose of teaching on the course, and particularly hearing the experiences of the Candidates in describing and analysing the complexity of their work, casts some doubt that this is the case. The interacting complexities of adult protection and personalisation from a management point of view were graphically illustrated in some of the candidates work, as well as innovative practice adapted from children’s services models and methods. Managers described adult protection teams which seem to be operating on very shaky foundations (no office base, everyone working from home and connecting through a “hub”); and service delivery teams with hugely wide remits (adults with learning difficulties, deaf adults and palliative care all being dealt with by one team, was one example). This stretches the expertise of managers to the limit, and the evaluation clearly showed the value attached to the opportunity to learn, to share experiences, and to explore issues in a safe environment. The emphasis on understanding and developing leadership skills helped the non social workers to be more confident in their management of social work professionals.

Working in collaboration can be a complex and sometimes difficult process, involving stakeholders with different backgrounds, value bases and wishes for the programme (Rounce, 2007). The participatory nature of the development of this course, involving Skills for Care, agencies, service users and academic staff provided for a rich experience. This was an attempt to model the principles of a learning organisation. This method of creation was both challenging and supportive, but it did seem that all stakeholders were both involved and committed: when difficulties arose, the challenge was regarded as a shared task, enabling an agreed resolution. The pre-existing strong relationship which had grown over several years of collaboration on PQ education provided a firm foundation. The co –creation of the course had the added advantage that agencies could emphasise their involvement in the development when promoting the course to staff and their managers. Concerns or dissatisfaction from candidates could be mediated through the agency representatives. This philosophy of collaboration may be undermined by the current trend for tendering for training, with local authorities contracting for pre-existing courses. Such a practice, while ostensibly offering ‘value for money’ takes no account of the benefit of collaborative partnership working in the creation of training as explored by Bailey (2002a, 2002b). The financial support and developmental input into the demonstration sites from Skills for Care was invaluable.

Implications for social work practice and management

The question asked at the beginning of the evaluation was how far can such training address the challenges of the political and professional agenda for first line social work managers? Although this was a short course, it was clear from the evaluation data that the overarching aim

of the course, to equip candidates with skills and knowledge in leadership, management and safeguarding to meet the challenges described above, had been met, reinforcing findings from Keen et al (2013) and Macrae and McAllan (2010). Further to this, candidates gained confidence in being both a leader and a manager, and the course provided re-emphasis on the differences between the two. Agencies can therefore feel confident that short course management training is effective and worth investing in. For training to be really effective, it needs to be situated within a “learning organisation”, which Senge suggests is one where it is impossible not to learn because learning is so embedded in everything the organisation does (Senge, 1990, in Lawler and Bilson, 2010). Learning organisation literature tends to see the organisation as fundamentally stable, which may not be the case currently in social work organisations (Taylor, 2004). Managers will be leading their teams with less resources and more demand for services, needing an organisational approach which will help them develop and embed sophisticated management skills. The lack of engagement by candidates’ managers with the evaluation suggests that there may be barriers to social services departments being learning organisations (as was also found by Rounce (2007) in respect of an NHS leadership programme) which in turn will limit the shifts in social work practice being called for by Narey (2014) and Croisdale-Appleby (2014).

As a whole, the course has been received well. Candidates thoroughly enjoyed the course and provided much positive feedback. Much had been learned and as a result candidates identified areas for improvement within their workplace. The course is continuing to run and offers the opportunity for candidates to continue with a second module that uses an action learning approach to assist candidates’ embed their learning more effectively in practice.

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