

Project Summary

Systems leadership: exceptional leadership for exceptional times, a multi-method study for the Virtual Staff College

Policy, practice/research content

Systems leadership is emerging as a response to a particular set of contemporary conditions of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity in public services which raises unprecedented demands and challenges, and create unparalleled opportunities for creative change. In the face increased demand for public services, reduced resources and capacity, and 'wicked issues' that shape-shift and resist resolution, logic-based linear approaches are less effective. Strategic leaders increasingly recognise their role as systems leadership – leading across organisational and geopolitical boundaries, beyond individual professional disciplines, across a range of organisational and stakeholder cultures and without direct managerial control.

Background to the project

The Virtual Staff College (VSC) builds leadership capacity in child and family services through innovative development programmes. The VSC commissioned The Colebrooke Centre, working in collaboration with the Centre for Health Enterprise at Cass Business School, City University London, to explore how systems leadership is evolving in different UK and international contexts; identify its key features, supportive and inhibitive conditions and link with improved outcomes; understand its application to the future political, economic and social contexts of child and family services; advise on how it can be developed and implemented, and produce a range of resources to support this.

Project design

The project began in Autumn 2012 and involves a number of components:

- an international literature review on leadership in complex systems
- qualitative interviews with UK systems leaders across the public and voluntary sectors
- case studies of systems leadership in action in the UK
- reviews and case studies of complex leadership in four international jurisdictions (the US, Canada, Australia and Denmark).

We have also been commissioned to produce a range of implementation resources to support application of the learning, with the aim of building individual, organisational and systems capacity for systems leadership. We are working with a Co-Production Group of systems leaders in child and family services and with international partners as well as with Cass Business School.

Publications and outputs

A core synthesis paper and seven source papers will be published on the VSC website (<http://www.virtualstaffcollege.co.uk/>) in Autumn 2013.

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