

# THE AGILE UNIVERSITY

## CASE STUDY

### THE UNIVERSITY OF YORK STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

*Leadership for 'World-Class' Performance*

THE UNIVERSITY *of York*



elementa  
leadership

## The Context & Need

The University of York is ranked in the top 10 UK universities for teaching and research, in the top 100 globally and was named University of the Year in the 2010 THE awards.

To ensure continuing success and to respond to the complex challenges faced by all UK universities, its executive team commissioned a development programme for its top leaders with a clear remit of demonstrating greater leadership across a highly collegial organisation in order to build and sustain a world-class university.

In March 2008, The University of York engaged The Work Foundation to develop and deliver a learning experience for senior academic and non-academic leaders that would better equip them to appreciate, adapt and respond to the complexity they faced. Richard Sharpe (now Elementa Leadership), Associate Director and Head of Leadership Consultancy at The Work Foundation led the project at the outset. The programme is now servicing its fourth cohort in 2011 and with The Work Foundation's leadership consultancy business now having ceased, it is Elementa Leadership who are continuing to work with the University of York Human Resources team to ensure that the programme continues to be a relevant and powerful leadership development solution in an environment of unparalleled change in the global HE sector.

**The following aims were identified through a process of significant internal dialogue and with reference to the University of York Strategic Plan:**

1. To bring the University's senior leadership cadre (i.e. academic and non-academic leaders reporting into the executive body) into the institution's strategic dialogue;
2. To enable this group to become more engaged with the multitude of complex challenges facing The University of York, including its teaching, research, student, community and corporate aspirations;
3. To develop strategic leadership by embedding pan-institutional networks capable of and committed to delivering pan-institutional improvements;
4. To create a strategic resource for the University of York's executive body to access and mobilize as appropriate (e.g. socializing and building commitment to the University strategy);
5. To support senior leaders in practical ways to be better equipped to address strategic and day-to-day challenges;
6. To provide opportunities for this collective unit to focus its energies and talent toward making tangible changes across the University at no or low cost.

## Our Approach

2

The approach was one of co-creation in order to ensure that all stakeholders were connected and committed to their own development process. It encouraged a view of leadership that was more about building an adaptive sustainable community in which collective leadership, more than heroic and/or controlling individual leadership was more likely to address the external complexity facing HEIs. Working closely with The University of York's HR professionals, a programme was established grounded in the University's context, built upon the needs and experiences of participants and focused on delivering tangible and sustainable changes towards achieving its organisational aspirations.

## The Solution

The design process incorporated views from executive and senior leaders. The result was the development of a modular programme for combined cohorts of 16 senior academic and non-academic leaders designed to bring them together in an environment where what they had in common far outweighed what they did not. The programme involved outstanding leaders from industry and public life who shared their experience of leadership and provided insights from other organisations. Vitrally, it also introduced the notion of Strategic Improvement Idea Groups (SIIGs) as a central part of the programme, with each becoming a learning vehicle and 'return on investment' mechanism via detailed proposals to the executive for specific organisational improvements. In presenting these proposals to the Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, members of the executive group and other peer colleagues, each SIIG was also able to reflect on its learning and continue networking with like-minded leaders from across the institution. The remarkable commitment offered to the programme by the Vice-Chancellor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, particularly manifested in their attendance and active participation in many of its various elements was undoubtedly a critical factor in the success of the programme.

# The Solution

## Strategic Leadership Programme

### Objectives of the Programme

The programme is split into four distinct modules, each of which has its own objectives. These are as follows:

#### Module 1: Strategic Change

- To understand external drivers within HE and analyse strategic choices open to HEIs
- To clarify The University of York's choices and define the organisational challenges of delivering The University of York's Corporate Plan
- To define the Strategic Leader role and associated leadership challenges
- To create Strategic Improvement Idea Groups that will address the key organisational and leadership challenges

#### Module 2: Developing Self

- To better understand self in relation to others and make sense of the 360° and psychometric feedback
- To explore key stakeholder relationships and develop stronger leadership networks
- To build more effective and sustainable work based relationships
- To build influence through the use of 'personal power'

#### Module 3: Leading Teams

- To identify the elements of a high performing team
- To apply these elements to individual University of York departmental teams by defining actionable Team Development Plans
- To identify specific ways in which cross- departmental collaboration and interdisciplinary team working can be improved

#### Module 4: Ideas into Action

- To develop innovation practices that will transform ideas into value-adding solutions
- To fully prepare participants for the presentation of their Strategic Improvement Ideas
- To capture individual/collective reflections and learning points

## Features of the Programme

- It was designed through a genuine process of co-creation between The University of York and The Work Foundation and actively involved the Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Human Resources Director and a number of other senior University figures. It was designed using multiple inputs from key stakeholders and 'customers'. It was also emergent, as feedback from participants shaped future elements of the programme as it unfolded.
- It took as its focus the leadership challenges and opportunities associated with the new Corporate Plan. In this way leadership was defined with reference to strategy and not as an isolated, esoteric concept.
- It used the actual leadership challenges and opportunities of participants as source learning material and built dialogue and community around these. Peer coaching and support became key ways for individuals to make sense of and respond to their particular challenges
- It brought academic and non-academic together in an environment in which what they had in common (around building and sustaining a world-class university) far outweighed what they did not. This, helping to create a University of York wide collective leadership capability.
- It encouraged leaders to build sustainable high performance teams built on dialogue, community and engagement and promoted a view of leadership that was not based on 'one right way'. Further, it encouraged a view of leadership that was more about building an adaptive sustainable community in which collective leadership, more than heroic and/or controlling individual leadership was more likely to address the external complexity facing HEIs and individual departments. Because of this, academic and non-academic leaders alike could engage in leadership development without it appearing normative, prescriptive and simply not calibrated to the complexities of an academic institution.
- The intervention took an appreciative approach, uncovering and celebrating the very many leadership strengths that the pre-programme research had highlighted. It did not problematise academic leadership and/or berate it for not being 'private sector' or commercial enough. It sought to develop leadership to build and sustain a high performing world-class academic institution.
- It used, as a central learning device, Strategic Improvement Idea Action Learning Sets. These produced a form of return on investment in that the three sets involved each produced detailed proposals to the University Executive Group for specific organisational improvements linked to the new strategic plan. In addition these learning sets involved significant individual and collective learning and were in themselves the embodiment of collective leadership.

## The Result

The impact of the programme has, to date, been very positive. This was recognised in 2009 when it became a part of a winning submission to the Times Higher Education Awards in the category of 'Outstanding Contribution to Leadership Development'. Participants report feeling more confident in undertaking leadership roles following the programme. It is also clear that a leadership community and network is developing across the University in line with the initial aims and aspirations of the programme. This is producing informal and formal collaboration and knowledge sharing between different individuals and departments and is intensifying as an increasing number of managers complete the programme. The programme is in effect helping to better connect up the University.

A number of fresh initiatives linked to the University plan have been started and led by programme 'alumni'. These have included work on better communicating the plan itself and the development of a set of leadership principles as part of defining a distinctive University of York experience for staff and students. These initiatives have combined academics and non-academics working together on improvements that will benefit the University as a whole, another explicit aim of the programme. This points to another important outcome, the improved relationship and understanding between academic Heads of Department and Heads of Professional Services.

The active participation of the Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Registrar has built increased respect and trust between Heads of Department and the Senior Management Group and opened up the possibility of continuing two way communication and collaboration as the sector and the University respond to a dramatically changing policy, funding and increasingly competitive environment.

**In the view of Pat Lofthouse, Director of Human Resources:**

“The programme provides an essential opportunity to develop leadership community and capability across the University, bringing together members of academic and support functions and providing time for discussion and consideration of real life situations. “

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## About Us

Elementa Leadership is an organisation development consultancy with international cross-sectoral experience

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