

Conversation starters

Leading
environmental
engagement

April 2023



National
Co-ordinating
Centre for
Public Engagement



Natural
Environment
Research Council

Introduction

This resource was developed by the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) with and for environmental researchers and project staff, funded by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC).

As part of the NERC Researcher Engage Academy, we ran a series of workshops on engagement and impact leadership. Our Academy leaders - those with leadership roles and responsibilities in environmental engagement - reflected on the challenges they face to strategically lead engagement practices in the UK higher education and research context. This resource summarises our discussion, and we offer this as a conversation starter for your own work leading environmental engagement.

Defining leadership

Whilst there is value in having institutional leaders of public engagement, such as Heads of Public Engagement, Directors of Engagement, Knowledge Exchange, and Impact Leads, and of acknowledging their knowledge and expertise, leaders exist on many levels. Our Academy leaders reflected on what defines leadership, summed up by our session speaker, Steven Hill of Researcher England:

‘There’s no formula or list to what makes successful leadership. It is ultimately a process of influencing and motivating others to develop and deliver a common goal.’

Steven Hill, Research England

Leaders in public engagement are also change agents. They might be developing a strategic public engagement plan for their team, department, or institution; championing public engagement as part of the research process; celebrating public engagement in their team practice; or embedding public engagement as part of their team’s work and professional development. Public engagement is a critical part of the research landscape, but university cultures can sometimes inhibit engagement practice, so many leaders in public engagement are focused on culture change.

It can be helpful to see where your personal views and politics align to enable this change.

Skills

Leading public engagement requires skills that cut across research practice. The NCCPE partnered with Vitae to develop the **Public Engagement Leadership lens** for the **Researcher Development Framework**. This tool prioritises the skills, attributes, and knowledge most relevant to public engagement leadership and explores what these might look like in a well-developed practice.

At our workshop, our conversation evolved to discuss three key areas of skills in leadership and change agent work: listening to and consulting others with openness to others' ideas; adaptability, the ability to change how you lead to a given context; and having a vision but being pragmatic about how to make that vision real. The NCCPE mapped these skills to the Researcher Development Framework, highlighting three areas:

- Working with others
- Self-management
- Personal qualities

A diversified skillset contributes to successful leadership and culture change:

'Often, change agents are good listeners, are flexible and often have diversified knowledge. I think diversified knowledge is a key, but under-valued, skill. Sometimes, diversified knowledge is considered as being "jack of all trades, master of none" – but it is a skill that can promote creative, "thinking outside the box" collaborations across disciplines.'

Melanie Gibbs, UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology

'As well as helping you to identify what skills need further development, the Public Engagement Leadership lens is a really valuable tool to use to reflect on the vast number of skills you have already developed. It is a helpful reminder that your toolkit is just that: 'your toolkit' – value it, celebrate it, share it!'

Melanie Gibbs, UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology

Explore your leadership practice

Explore the **Public Engagement Leadership lens** in your own time.

Priorities: Would you prioritise the three areas we have highlighted? Are there other areas you would prioritise?

Skills: What skills are already in your toolkit? What skills need further development?

Leadership styles

Leadership is context dependent, and culture change happens when people feel supported in their context. Knowing how you lead, and your preferred leadership style, can help you adjust to different situations. In our workshops, we focussed on two models of leadership – connective leadership and distributed leadership.

‘Those leaders who employ the broadest and most flexible leadership repertoire are most likely to meet the complex challenges of the Connective Era.’

Connective Leadership Institute

Connective leadership emphasises working with and through people by integrating our diversities and interdependences and by bringing people together across their differences through nine behavioural strategies. These can help you understand your own leadership strategy and harness the power of others to achieve your goals. Read our [introduction to this model](#) and answer a few questions to learn more about your preferred strategy.

Distributed leadership emphasises that leadership is not only for those in senior positions or at the top of an organisational structure. It’s not that those in positions of authority aren’t important, or that everyone is a leader all the time. Instead, it’s that everyone can be a leader and can exert influence within specific spaces of that structure. With this model, leadership action is shared, not delegated. It distributes the authority to lead and uplifts staff working across the organisation, whether working in hierarchical organisations, flat structures, cross-team projects, or spaces of assumed leadership. Read our [introduction to this model](#) and the eight hallmarks of practice.

‘Learning about this model was helpful because it’s how so many engagement and research projects progress, particularly when you are improving and learning as you go. Progress can feel slower, and a little odd within the norms of academic engagement, but it was really heartening to see the evidence that working this way can catalyse innovation!’

Jenni Barclay, University of East Anglia

The roles needed to develop collaborative research programmes are articulated in the [Creating Living Knowledge Report](#) lexicon (pages 73-77). It details roles that bring complex engagement projects to life from catalyser to broker. It provides an example of what distributed leadership might look like in practice. All the roles described embody leadership and that the authority to lead can be shared across the team in effective ways.

The need for a distributed model can be particularly important for projects that span disciplines:

‘Increasingly, academics work in interdisciplinary and even transdisciplinary teams, where distributed leadership approaches that recognise the value of diverse perspectives improve decision making and enable every individual within a team to have agency in working towards a collective goal.’

Ria Dunkley, University of Glasgow

An awareness of the distributed leadership model from the start of a project will enable you to harness its potential power, but it can develop organically:

‘Reflecting on a recent successful cross-discipline dance-science public engagement with research collaboration, I now recognise that “distributed leadership” naturally and organically evolved during the co-development process. Each team member had full independence and ownership over their contributions, and importantly the team could celebrate successes at both individual- and team-levels at each step of the process. This resulted in a team who trusted and respected each other, with each individual fully committed to using, and sharing, their skills and knowledge to make the project the best it could possibly be.’

Melanie Gibbs, UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology

Our leaders reflected that not all styles are good nor is one the absolute ideal. Adapting to your context can help your team, strategic engagement, and change work to thrive. Equally, it can help you to identify, challenge and change problematic norms.

Explore your leadership style

When thinking about your leadership style, consider

Your context: Government bodies, universities, research institutions and groups may promote or prefer different leadership styles. What is your preferred leadership style? What about your wider team? Your organisation? How can you motivate, influence, and communicate across these styles?

Partner context: What leadership processes do your partners use? Approaches will differ from a museum to artist collective to community group. Approaches to leading engagement differ within research practices as well. One may focus on engagement as an output while another may prioritise the creative process. Working with different partners requires flexibility in your own leadership style. It also means identifying, supporting, and moving power to leaders within these groups.

Strategic leadership

Leading and being a change agent requires a blend of idealism and pragmatism. It means having a long-term strategic vision to embed public engagement in your research environment and a willingness to respond to change.

Our environmental engagement leaders reflected on the levels of local, national, and international policy they must work within. A tension arose for some, when a university's current drive for local civic engagement could feel at odds to their research and public engagement work which focused elsewhere in the UK. However, the civic agenda also offers new possibilities, recognising local communities are diverse and may have national or even global connections, and national or global research may offer local benefits.

'In my institution there is a strong drive towards local civic engagement, which can appear to limit the range of activities staff can engage in. Local communities are however diverse, representative of global populations and cultures and provide links beyond the immediate area. Engaging locally will provide key training, skills and inspiration for projects that can expand to a wider stage.'

Jacqui Mulville, Cardiff University

Explore your policy landscape

Consider the policies and agendas in your context and how they operate at different levels.

Local policies: civic agendas, education, teaching, research, innovation, and impact objectives

National policies: social movements (such as Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion), government agendas (such as Levelling Up), and funding body directives (such as URKI's 2022-2027 strategy)

International policies: UN Sustainable Development Goals, UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP)

Next steps

This conversation starter offers some ideas of the skills, styles and strategic thinking needed to lead public engagement in the environmental engagement context. Visit the NCCPE website to find more tools, including the [EDGE tool](#) to assess public engagement in your context. Why not try applying it to your team, departmental or institutional context, or use the [mini EDGE tools](#) to focus on specific strategic areas.

Thank you to all those who contributed to the workshops and development of this resource. This programme was funded by the Natural Environment Research Council.



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