CultureCase

Explaining leadership reluctance in the cultural sector

This research was conducted by **Kim Goodwin** at the **University of Melbourne, Australia**

Summary

The study is based on 41 interviews with Australian arts and cultural practitioners. The research centres on nine emerging leaders: people who were recognised by their peers as having leadership potential, having spent at least five years working in their chosen discipline, running small organisations, advocating for their communities and influencing their fields. The opinions of people in the orbits of the emerging leaders were also canvassed. An overall majority of all interviewees were female and aged between 30 and 45. The interviewees made a clear distinction between ‘doing leadership’ and ‘willingness to be seen as a leader’. Leaders themselves often showed a strong tendency to be defensive or modest or uncomfortable about identifying as a leader.

The paper explores some of the underlying factors that feed into leadership reluctance in the cultural sector

The first is a lack of confidence (which both feeds leadership reluctance and is prompted by the acquisition of leadership roles). Gender is another major factor, not only in the way that individuals are socialised to behave but also the way that leadership more broadly is imagined in our wider culture. Another complication is the way that leadership is perceived to relate to a specific functional or bureaucratic role, whereas leaders experience it as a set of behaviours or attitudes. Finally, a tendency towards egalitarianism and anti-hierarchical attitudes (especially common in Australian society) mean that

leaders are reluctant to set themselves above or apart from others in an organisation or peer group.

This research has one major implication for leadership development in the arts

If people continue to resist owning their leadership status then, ‘in developing future cultural leaders, the aim should not only be to build the capacity of leaders, but to raise the standard of leadership across the sector’. Otherwise, there will be lots of potential leaders who will think that leadership training is not for them.

Keywords

interview **leadership** **Australia** **gender**

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