

EVALUATING LEAD: LEARNING RESOURCES FOR GROWING LEADERS

Church Army's Research Unit, December 2024



Executive summary

The LEAD leadership development program is equipping participants to work more effectively in their roles and giving them increased skills and confidence in leadership. The ‘taught content’ provided through learning resources is equipping participants with tools that they use in their everyday leadership, but more importantly the action learning process is equipping them with an ability to reflect deeply and act confidently when faced with complicated problems. The integration of theory and practise through reflection in a supportive environment of peers has yielded ‘transformational learning’ for many participants.

LEAD could be strengthened by finding ways to more explicitly teach the skills and expectations of action learning, so that new participants are equipped and retained, and that LEAD alumni might be equipped to teach action learning to their own teams, thereby increasing overall organisational competence and responsibility.

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Introduction

LEAD is a leadership development program developed by Church Army. Although originally designed for Church Army Evangelists, it is currently being accessed by participants from a variety of leadership contexts, including:

- Church Army Evangelists
- Church leaders
- Line managers

This report presents the findings of an internal evaluation of LEAD that was carried out by Church Army's Research Unit between 2021 and 2024. The original objectives of this evaluation were:

- To determine whether LEAD participants were working more effectively in their roles, and if this could be attributed to participation in LEAD.
- To determine whether LEAD participants were better equipped to apply for Lead Evangelist posts in Church Army Centres of Mission.

The second of those objectives reflects an original understanding that LEAD's primary purpose was to equip Church Army Evangelists for leadership. Whilst LEAD is still fulfilling that purpose, it has evolved considerably since this evaluation began so that it now includes many participants from outside Church Army. For this reason, the second objective has not been investigated directly as part of this evaluation. However, since LEAD is shown here to increase participants' skills, knowledge and confidence in leadership, it is implied that pioneer evangelists are better equipped for Lead Evangelist posts.

Methodology

This mixed-methods evaluation was conducted using multiple data collection tools. These included:

- An online evaluation form that was completed by participants at the end of each module.
- 7 short interviews with LEAD participants, conducted at the end of each module.
- A focus group with 3 Church Army Evangelists who had undertaken multiple LEAD modules.
- An interview with a Church Army Mission Development Officer who line managed several Evangelists who had completed LEAD modules.

During the time that this evaluation was conducted, the vast majority of LEAD participants were women. Of the 6 end-of-module interviews conducted, only 2 were with men. All 3 focus group participants were women, as was the Mission Development Officer who was interviewed. About half of all interviews were with Church Army Evangelists.

A digital '360' review tool was also designed for use in this evaluation, but a low level of engagement with the tool meant that it provided insufficient data for the current analysis.

What is LEAD?

LEAD is a leadership development program that uses an action learning model to facilitate constructive reflection on leadership practice. LEAD offers 5 modules, each of which runs over six weekly sessions. These are:

Module	Module type	Description
Authentic Leadership	Foundation	Values, vision and personal identity as a leader
Healthy Leadership	Foundation	Sustaining and protecting passion for leadership
Team Leadership	Foundation	Building and leading effective, healthy teams and managing conflict
Collaborative Leadership	Advanced	Develop skills for partnering beyond one's immediate team
Enabling Leadership	Advanced	Developing others and practical tools for doing so

After an initial week of objective-setting as preparation, each of LEAD's weekly sessions is comprised of a cycle of action learning in which each participant has an opportunity to present an issue that they are currently wrestling with as a leader. Following each presentation, non-presenters formulate reflective questions to give to the presenter, who receives them and integrates them into their reflection. The presenter then identifies the action they will take before the next session and is invited to reflect on the experience and highlight any particularly helpful questions they were given by the group. Once everybody has presented, the group reflect on and review their time together. Participants prepare themselves for each session by engaging with a selection of relevant learning resources.

The advice monster

Because LEAD sessions are built around the giving and receiving of helpful questions, participants are trained to guard themselves against the 'advice monster'. The advice monster is the figurative nemesis of all action learners, who represents the instinctive urge to give advice instead of asking questions. LEAD alumni have learned to 'tame' their advice monster¹ and sometimes use this metaphor as a shorthand for the discipline of reflective action learning in general. Some participants preferred the more violent image of 'crushing' their advice monster. This subtle distinction may belie a mild controversy that surrounds the advice monster: some participants feel that action learning sessions would be strengthened by a more vigorous purging of advice, whereas others wonder if indulging the occasional piece of advice might enable valuable contributions. Is the advice monster truly a monster, or has it been misunderstood?

¹ The image of taming one's advice monster was popularised by Michael Bungay Stanier in his 2020 TEDx talk on the subject. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kl0rmx7aa0w>

Findings

Overview of quantitative findings

Data collected through end-of-module surveys indicate that LEAD is equipping participants to lead more effectively:

- 85% felt more equipped to lead in their context as a result of undertaking LEAD.²
- 83% were interested in taking another LEAD module.
- 84% said that their learning from the module had changed their approach to leadership.

Qualitative highlights

LEAD equips participants with new tools and models for navigating leadership problems, but its main effect is to transform participants into perpetual action learners who are able to reflect deeply on their practise and take confident action accordingly. These are some of the ways that participants described the benefits of LEAD:

- ‘This is genuinely transformational learning.’
- ‘I have ... stepped over a threshold to a place of restoration.’
- ‘[Action learning] enables a safe space where real learning can take place ... The material was engaging and provided an excellent scaffolding for this process.’
- ‘I went into this module expecting to be equipped with some tools for enabling leaders ... my actual learning was much, much deeper.’

Participants also articulated the ways in which LEAD had led to direct changes in their practise and experience of leadership:

- ‘I am more conscious of the “modes” that I am in within different teams and can tailor my responses to situations accordingly.’
- ‘It has helped me find ways to be more prepared, but also let go of needing to be in control of everything.’
- ‘I have found it easier to cope with difficult situations and have those difficult conversations ... I think the course has made me braver!’
- ‘I’ve found the reflective element really helpful, and this has caused me to slow down when it comes to decision-making and be able to take in more information, as well as being more confident and at peace with decisions once I’ve made them.’
- ‘Not feeling like I have to solve everything or have all the answers.’
- ‘The module has increased the tools available to me which in turn improves my confidence.’
- ‘People are starting to come up with their own ideas with enthusiasm, rather than expecting clergy to do everything!’

² 2 of the 4 negative responses to this question were from respondents who, as part of the same response, described the module in question as ‘genuinely transformational learning’ or stated that through it they had ‘stepped over a threshold to a place of restoration’. It is hard to know how to interpret this apparent contradiction, but it may indicate a response error.

- ‘It has made me appreciate the continual need to lead with an attitude of love.’
- ‘Those that have done LEAD are very well skilled in leading teams of volunteers ... [they] definitely handle that complexity well and have good skills in resolving conflict.’

Reflection that’s grounded in practise

‘To be talking about it while you’re putting it into practise was different than just learning the theory. It was actually, you know, you have the confidence, you have the courage, you have the tools, you are in charge, go and get on with it - you can do it ... and go and put it into practise instantly.’

‘One of the joys’ of LEAD was ‘that it was practical’. Rather than reacting to hypothetical scenarios, participants brought the ‘real life problems’ of their ministry to each session and reflected on them as a group. Using real, personal situations in this way forces group reflection to remain relevant, realistic and actionable.

Relevant reflection involves carefully uncovering the unique nuances and complexities of real-world problems in order to formulate a relevant solution. LEAD participants sought to understand one another’s problems through thoughtful questions, and this process in turn clarified the problem for the person who had brought the problem. One participant described having issues ‘honed through questions’; she received either a possible solution or ‘a question ... I needed to hone further’.

The fruit of relevant reflection was realistic outcomes - refined questions or proposals for action that acknowledged the context and capacity of each participant. One participant recalled feeling ‘a bit sceptical’ about a session on ‘healthy habits and self-care’, because previous conversations had left her feeling that there was ‘so much stuff you should be doing’, but ‘practically it doesn’t work’ when it comes to ‘trying to fit it all in’. Instead, she found that ‘doing it in this format was good, because people were talking about how they make things sustainable in their context, rather than fitting things in to tick the healthy box’.

Finally, because outcomes were realistic, they were actionable. This meant that LEAD sessions gave participants the ‘accountability to go back and say, “Yes, I did do this.”’ These actions and their results then became the subject of further reflection:

‘I can sort it within the week - I can try it and see how the solution works. And then if it doesn’t work, next week I’ll come back.’

‘Doing it in this format was good because people were talking about how they make things sustainable in their context.’

'[I] valued just holding other people and thinking about questions for them ... just the giving and receiving dynamic of the meet-up.'

Reflection amongst friends

LEAD is inherently relational. Participants bring problems and give and receive one another's questions as they seek to aid and understand one another. Participants who undertook several modules with one another enjoyed developing deeper understandings of one another's personalities and projects, establishing increasing trust as they learned to reflect with one another. When new participants were introduced at the start of a new module, group dynamics could shift towards 'giving advice' for a week or two before people learned the art of asking questions.

Participants appreciated the diversity of contexts and ministries that were present at each session and identified this a strength of LEAD's online format. Church Army Evangelists particularly appreciated a sense of connection with the wider organisation, particularly if they were not Church Army employees or they were working outside of England. One Church Army supporter who first heard about LEAD through a 'prayer email' said that she never expected her giving to Church Army would 'give me a gift back'.

Another benefit of action learning amongst peers is that it provided a safe space for reflection that was detached from the context of ministry. This meant that sensitive issues could be discussed in a space that was 'outside of the locality', and also that many participants had a 'safe space' to discuss their weaknesses and failures openly. In the words of one curate:

'The CofE leaks like crazy, and this was a safe space outside of your employment. There's a little bit of a conflict in curacy and in ministry because all of your support is from the people who provide you with beans on toast or a roof over your head. [But with LEAD] if you'd cocked something up you could just come and say, "Oh no".'

Clear reflection that leads to confident action

Church Army Evangelists and their line managers both identified increased confidence as one of the main benefits of undertaking LEAD. Action learning with supportive peers has helped Evangelists who were feeling 'out of their depth' to reflect clearly and act decisively in response to difficult situations.

Church Army Evangelists are trained to work in situations that are often changing, and with people whose needs can be difficult to predict. Because of this, Evangelists are very good at doing new things in response to complicated situations as they listen to God and follow his leading. It requires a lot of skill to continually respond in new ways to changing needs, but ironically this process can leave Evangelists feeling as though they do not know what they are doing. One Evangelist described it like this:

‘I’m always ... literally going into situations just saying, “Lord, I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m going to need some words or I’m going to need some guidance or I’m going to need you to make it really obvious.”’

In situations like this, LEAD’s action learning model gave Evangelists space to reflect the problems they were facing, and supportive peers gave them the confidence to move from reflection to action:

‘Confidence - that’s something I really appreciated - people gave you the encouragement to say, actually you have worked out what you need to do, you can go away and do it rather than thinking, “I’m out of my depth - no idea what I’m doing.”’

As well as giving them the confidence to take action, LEAD gave Evangelists the language required to explain their actions to others:

‘I do know how to do stuff ... what I often don’t have is the language to explain it to other people ... but actually doing the LEAD course has given me a bit more of the language that I need.’

Creating reflectors

‘I’ve been a lot more reflective.’

As discussed above, the reflective space provided by LEAD has helped participants to formulate clear action plans in the midst of difficult situations. But apart from these immediate benefits, LEAD is also fulfilling its long-term ambition of equipping people in ministry with an ability to reflect deeply on their own practise, be that in a group or independently. One participant explained the method of ‘crushing your advice monster’ was something that ‘you actually really have to practise’ in the action learning sessions. Becoming practised in ‘asking questions ... and receiving questions’ means that you ‘actually process in a much deeper way’. For this participant, who was a curate, this had led to much richer theological reflection, which ‘leads to real organic growth in your ministry’.

Powerful tools (not power tools)

Participants described how LEAD had given them new tools, including practical exercises and theoretical models, for engaging with difficult problems:

‘I appreciated the ability to reflect on Goleman’s leading styles, Lencioni’s explorations of trust, and Pink’s ideas on motivation, and apply them to real-time team issues.’

These were powerful tools, but they were not used as ‘power tools’; they facilitated purposeful reflection, rather than forcing prescribed solutions. One participant, who was working on a complex project, found that the newly learned tool of ‘mapping out’ stakeholders was ‘really helpful’ for discerning ‘How do we take that project forward in that space? I’m still thinking about wider stakeholders, but just beginning to think about how to take it forward.’ Likewise, tools for thinking through relationships and sharing had helped them to ‘think through’, ‘pick through’ and ‘negotiate’ some ‘difficult pastoral issues’. Another participant described the relationship between tools and reflection as follows:

‘I went into the module expecting to be equipped with some tools for enabling leaders, performance management, etcetera. And while I was given those sorts of resources, my learning in this module was much, much deeper. I learned most about myself, my impetus for leadership, and uncovered some of my reluctance to tackle the difficult parts of being a leader. This is genuinely transformational learning, not just training for a role.’

Opportunities for development

Learning action learning

It takes time for most participants and groups to settle into a pattern of effective action learning. However, some participants ‘really struggle’ to understand action learning and in extreme cases will stop participating in LEAD after a single module, because the six sessions were insufficient to facilitate an appreciation for the method. One participant described some of her fellow participants as ‘expecting a talk with answers given!’ Many participants conveyed in their module feedback a sense of surprise that the independent learning materials shared before each session did not ‘come up’ in the sessions themselves. These mismatched expectations indicate that these participants, having completed the module, expected the sessions to involve discussing the module’s taught content directly, rather than applying it through action learning. These participants might benefit from a more explicit induction into the action learning method. One person has suggested that a ‘practical video’ might be helpful for that purpose.³

Intentionality

Jayne (Church Army’s Leadership Development Officer) has shared that within some groups, the open-ended, relational nature of LEAD can lead to some sessions functioning more as a ‘support network’ or ‘reflective space’ than a setting for deliberate, leadership-orientated action learning. Part of the value of LEAD is certainly that it creates a reflective space in which people feel supported, but when participants are not all adequately inducted into the practise of action learning, this can result in problems being brought for discussion that are not always ‘work focused’ or are not related to specific and manageable objectives. It will require careful reflection to untangle this dynamic, since LEAD sessions are naturally open-ended and often yield value for participants that extends beyond specific learning objectives. This may be further evidence that LEAD participants would benefit from being more explicitly inducted into the skill of action learning, since this might enable them to think more carefully about the problems they bring to each session without placing any strict restraint on the conversation and the value that it might yield.

Teaching action learning

The Church Army Mission Development Officer we spoke to suggested that:

‘There is an inherent value in the action learning set model ... [it] might be a good source of ongoing support for evangelists, staff, all sorts of people ... what would happen if there was a LEAD module in “facilitating action learning sets”.’

This recommendation is worth considering. Since a great deal of the experienced value of LEAD is directly related to learning the skill of action learning, LEAD alumni might benefit from a final module that teaches them how to teach others what they have been taught. Participants are already uncovering this value for themselves in small ways. One curate remarked:

³ This suggestion has already been actioned. A video was produced in August 2024 and will be used as part of the induction programme for new LEAD cohorts.

'The advice monster ... that's something I like to take into everyday ministry now - helping people find their own solutions.'

The fact that participants are already seeking to equip their teams and others around them with the skills of action learning suggests that there would be appetite for a module with this explicit aim.

Consistent promotion

LEAD is attracting participants from across the UK and beyond. These participants are from a variety of contexts, and most appear to have heard of LEAD via word-of-mouth or an existing connection to Church Army, such as being a regular supporter of our work or a retired Evangelist. Within Church Army, some line managers appear to be 'plugging' LEAD more consistently than others, which leads to certain regions or nations being more represented than others. We also noted that there were considerably more women than men undertaking LEAD, which may be an effect of word-of-mouth promotion. It is encouraging that commissioned Evangelists and others are 'opting in' to LEAD despite a lack of consistency in promotion, but it is likely that many more could benefit from the program if promotion was targeted and consistent.

Conclusion

This report has presented the findings of Church Army's Research Unit's internal evaluation of the LEAD leadership development program, which sought to investigate:

- Whether LEAD participants were working more effectively in their roles.
- Whether LEAD participants were better equipped to apply for Lead Evangelist posts in Church Army Centres of Mission.

It has been found that LEAD is equipping participants to work more effectively in their roles by enabling them to integrate theory and practise as they reflect deeply and act confidently when faced with complex problems. Although this implies that LEAD participants are better equipped for Lead Evangelist roles, it was not possible to investigate the second objective directly.

In the light of LEAD's overall effectiveness, we suggest that consideration should be given to the ways in which it is promoted and/or deployed within Church Army. Presently, awareness of and interest in LEAD appears to be contingent on promotion through word-of-mouth or varied communication from line managers. The program has been well-received by clergy and ordinands, despite a lack of deliberate promotion targeting those groups. We also suggest that LEAD is considered as a resource through which an organisational culture of action learning could be nurtured; if LEAD alumni can be equipped to facilitate action learning, then both Church Army's national staff and Centres of Mission might become spaces in which collaborative reflection and confident action are the norm.

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