THE BRIDGE: FROM MANAGING TASKS TO LEADING PEOPLE

An experiential activity on leadership in education, based on the cards activity in Malta

Vlăsceanu Diana, Impăratu Lăcrămioara, Cocoș Gabriela

A simple paper bridge can reveal important truths about leadership. In the activity "The Bridge", participants are invited to build a free-standing bridge spanning 30 cm, working in two short rounds. The task remains the same, but the approach of the person in charge changes. This contrast offers a practical opportunity to reflect on how leadership shapes motivation, responsibility, creativity and collaboration.

Two approaches, two different experiences

In the first round, the manager focuses on efficiency, control and compliance. The worker receives precise instructions, a strict time limit and restricted resources. Progress is checked constantly, deviations are corrected, and the worker is not invited to contribute ideas. Although this approach may create clarity and keep a task closely aligned with a plan, it can also limit initiative and reduce the worker's sense of ownership.

In the second round, the leader begins by explaining why the bridge matters and describing a shared vision of success. Instead of prescribing every step, the leader asks the worker how they would approach the challenge, supports experimentation and removes obstacles. Encouragement replaces constant correction, while responsibility is shared. The worker is trusted to make decisions and is given space to turn an idea into action.

The observer's role is equally important. By recording exact words, behaviours and changes in body language, the observer gathers evidence before interpreting it. During the debrief, these observations can help the group identify the differences between managing a task and leading people—and consider which behaviours create commitment, confidence and engagement.

What does the bridge teach us about leadership in education?

Schools, like the team building the bridge, work towards goals that can only be achieved through cooperation. Educational leadership is therefore more than assigning duties, monitoring deadlines or ensuring that procedures are followed. It also means communicating a meaningful purpose, recognising people's strengths, listening to different perspectives and creating the conditions in which others can contribute and grow. A strong educational leader does not need to have every answer or make every decision. Instead, they build trust, encourage initiative and help a team turn a shared vision into collective action.

This is particularly relevant to our Erasmus+ plan and its final aim, which focuses on leadership in education. The activity translates that aim into an experience participants can examine and discuss. It invites teachers and other members of the school community to reflect on their own leadership habits and on how they can support a more collaborative, participatory and empowering school culture. Leadership is not confined to formal positions: it can be practised by teachers who inspire colleagues, by students who take responsibility for a project, and by teams that make decisions together.

The Erasmus+ dimension also encourages us to look beyond the individual participant. Learning gained through international cooperation and professional development should not remain an isolated experience. It becomes meaningful when it is shared with colleagues, applied in classrooms, extended to students and embedded in the wider life of the school. In this way, leadership supports the transfer of new ideas and practices across the institution and strengthens a learning community that is open to change.

Building more than a bridge

Ultimately, the purpose of the activity is not simply to discover which team builds the stronger paper bridge. It is to recognise that sustainable results depend not only on the task or the plan, but also on the way people are treated and involved. When educational leaders provide direction and meaning while allowing others the freedom to contribute, they build something more durable than a paper structure: trust, shared responsibility and the capacity for collective growth. That is the bridge our Erasmus+ leadership objective seeks to strengthen within our school.