

Leadership is more than just good leaders

(By Danny Chesterman, Director, Bath Consultancy Group)

No one can dispute the fact that the current UK Government has invested substantially in leadership development. We have seen the establishment of leadership academies in all the main areas of the public service – albeit with widely varying funding regimes. But there has been too much investment in individual leaders as if they are separate and free agents rather than a participant in a web of complex relationships; and too much leadership development in abstract, rather than sited in the heat of the struggle with a particular issue.

Some of these concerns have been acknowledged with the coming together of individual leadership academies to form the Public Service Leadership Alliance^[1]. This move offers an opportunity to make the whole ‘leadership’ agenda mean more than just good leaders. The real challenge they face is turning around interagency cooperation to create the required customer focussed public sector. To do this the different lines of accountability, funding and charging arrangements, and stakeholder interests will all need to be transcended.

It is exactly this challenge that creates much of the anxiety that is often experienced in public service delivery. By finding ways of working together in mutually beneficial cooperation not only will the experience of individuals be transformed but a difference can be made to the issues that undermine communities such as drugs, crime, poverty and health.

Our work at Bath Consultancy Group tackles interagency cooperation by focussing on:

- Starting, not finishing, with the customer experience
- Experimenting with strategy that allows for multiple contributions

Start with the customer experience

Customer-focussed leadership is one of six key criteria identified by Professor Ivan Robertson and Elisabeth Henderson in their research for the Cabinet Office^[2] and is seen as critical to service transformation.

Recent research by Demos^[3] articulated the notion of services as a cycle of critical encounters that take place over time and across channels and it offers tools and processes to look at services through the eyes of the customer or user.

Starting with the customer experience means changing the way we invest in leadership development. Rather than recruiting unconnected individuals and then looking for real life applications, some of the most promising developments start with an issue and then attract the key individuals who are needed to shift the system.

The Scottish Leadership Foundation has been doing some ground-breaking work in the field of drugs. They have brought different agencies together in particular localities to tackle this issue.

The award-winning C4C programme, commissioned by Public Service Management Wales and delivered by a consortium led by the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice, breaks the traditional mould by recruiting clusters of people who are working to a shared agenda.

The Centre for Leadership in Local Government is also developing some exciting projects based on the leadership of place. This takes as the site of development the sum of relationships, not just between direct partners, but also the cumulative relationships with Whitehall. We need much more of this sort of adventurous development.

New ways of strategising

Most approaches to partnership start with finding a common goal. It might sound logical and fits with the common view of a predictable and linear cause and effect relationship. However, it does not fit into our complex world where there are multiple inter-dependencies, cause and effect that flows in many different directions simultaneously, and which cannot be controlled by an individual at the top.

In truth, no matter how well-intentioned or committed, many partnerships run into the ground through the sheer complexity of the agendas that underpin the relationships.

OpenStrategy (www.openstrategies.co.uk) is one exciting new approach that starts from a different assumption. As Dr Phil Driver, Chairman of OpenStrategies (UK) Ltd, says; "In an ideal world people could keep vast amounts of complex information in their heads, clearly understand how it all connects, understand instinctively what other people believe to be important, be forever generous in offering their support to others, and have no difficulty in working together for the common good. None of us inhabit this world!"

By providing a picture of what each stakeholder wants to achieve and the steps to get there, systems such as OpenStrategy offer a different way to mobilise and connect the contributions of diverse communities of interest.

In such systems, no one organisation dictates the goals or agendas of the participating partners. People can see where they may be able to contribute to the activities of the partner organisations for the benefit of the community: the system facilitates opportunities for collaboration which, ordinarily, can be missed in the fog of plans, targets and competing agendas.

To deliver the public service that we all deserve requires a change in how leadership and strategy are perceived and how development is delivered. By addressing these two challenges leadership focuses directly on the customer experience and provides a different way of working together. The prize that beckons is not just better public service but a renewal of faith in leadership itself.

danny.chesterman@bathconsultancygroup.com

^[1] The Public Service Leadership Alliance (formerly Consortium) was initially under the remit of Wendy Thomson in the Public Services Reform Unit, and more recently under Professor Sue Richards' stewardship in the National School of Government

^[2] <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/workforcematters/leadership/reform/research.asp>

^[3] The research by Demos, sponsored by PriceWaterhouseCoopers, is called 'The Journey to the Interface' by Sophia Parker and Joe Heapy