



Leadership for a new decade

It is not news to any of us that the world is changing, and it is changing fast.

Over the last decade the UK public sector has responded to technological disruption, societal and environmental change, political drama, austerity, and shifting citizen demands.

As we enter the 2020s, the additional and profound impact of COVID-19 on our society, state, and economy is undoubtedly accelerating changes to policy, service delivery and ways of working.

Setting a course for the future

Think of the current COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders across the public sector are facing unprecedented challenges as they seek to navigate the immediate crisis while setting a course for the future of their teams, organisations and systems.

While some leaders are thriving in this environment, tackling new and complex issues and delivering extraordinary outcomes at incredible pace, we are hearing from others who feel overwhelmed by the relentless busyness, even trapped on a 'hamster wheel of back-to-back calls and tele-conferences'.

Many leaders are questioning whether they are focused in the right areas, whether they are striking the right balance between the operational and strategic, the immediate and the longer term.

Under heightened pressure, leaders are observing changes in their own and others' behaviours impacting performance and relationships.

What has become clear in responding to COVID-19 is just how important the 'human' element of leadership is

For those remote working this is perhaps more evident than ever, with leaders recognising the need to keep connected, care for each other's wellbeing, and in more flexible ways.

Out of current hardships, these may be some of the positive lasting consequences.



Leaders of the future

Leaders are already looking to the longer term, a new landscape that will demand new models of service delivery and a workforce searching for clarity of purpose, connectedness, and a renewed confidence to deliver.

If leaders are to step up and flourish in this new decade, it is crucial that they take the time now to step back, to reflect on their leadership practices and impact and to re-centre themselves for the challenges ahead. In doing so, five key priorities from our recent research provide a useful starting point:



Be purpose led

Are you bringing high-definition clarity of purpose?

This is about leaders living their personal and organisational why, asking questions, taking decisions and prioritising resources and activities based on purpose and core values. It is about aligning outcomes, strategies and people to the public value their teams and organisations deliver for citizens. As one Chief Executive told us, "The key to our success has been an unrelenting focus on purpose. By continually coming back to our why, we've asked different questions, shifted how we think and been able to do and achieve so much more".



Be connected

Are you investing sufficient time and energy in the right relationships and collaborations, those that support performance and the delivery of outcomes?

In our experience, leadership is rooted in the strength of the relationships between leaders not the individuals themselves yet many fail to move past positive intent to effective collaboration. Addressing today's wicked issues demands a shift in focus from developing individual leaders as stand-alone experts to developing leadership in integrated and collaborative teams. In the words of one senior leader, "Modern leaders need to recognise they don't know everything and should have a collection of 'go to' people for new ideas, specific skills and critical friend review. The key bit here is around trust... Trust underpins collaboration and a lack of it undoes it quickly".



Be curious

Are you genuinely curious about others, their diverse ideas, perspectives and experiences?

Leadership in the next decade will not just demand connectedness but genuine inclusivity, with leaders actively seeking out diverse perspectives, bringing greater openness and curiosity to interactions and shifting energy towards possibility and innovation. For many leaders, this will require more time observing, reflecting and listening, really listening, to others. One senior civil servant commented, "My role isn't to come up with the ideas, my role is to go searching, to find the great ideas, to shine a light on them and to put resources and support behind them".

Leaders of the future



Be adaptable

Are you clear on the personal changes you will need to make if you are to deliver the changes you seek?

COVID-19 has forced leaders to adapt, to re-engineer their organisations and to rapidly pivot to address challenge, change and disruption. Increasingly the willingness and ability of leaders to embrace change, navigate ambiguity and complexity, and harness an increasingly diverse workforce will be key but real change will also require leaders to recognise themselves as key cogs in the systems they seek to change. Research shows us that the only certainty leaders can predict with any surety for the next decade, is more and faster change. Adaptable leaders will be those willing to challenge the status quo, recognising that problems 'out there' are 'in here' and to turn the change lens on themselves.



Be human

Are you doing enough to value your people and demonstrate commitment to their well-being?

Successful leaders in the new decade will unleash the talent and creativity of their people, they will focus on serving their teams by removing obstacles, providing meaning, and empowering others through human connections. COVID-19 has opened up wider conversations about wellbeing, with organisations responding with positive initiatives that are likely to remain beyond the crisis, accepted as the 'new normal'. But being human goes beyond any initiative. As one senior leader shared with us, "On a day where I had to move jobs because of austerity (I didn't want to) I came into my office for the last time and on my desk was a card. I opened it and it was from my line manager...she wrote me a card to say thank you and wishing me luck. That simple. She is now very senior and I'd walk over hot coals for her. I stumbled across the card she left me the other day. It was from 2010. It brought a huge smile to my face. People follow people. End of".



Conclusion

As we enter the new decade, organisations will be required to respond to unprecedented and complex challenges whilst embarking on their own transformations. It will be essential they place leadership at the heart of these changes, moving beyond traditional approaches to leader development. For individual leaders, this will demand investment in deep reflection, observation, listening and disciplined action. It will require leaders to both build on and move beyond their individual knowledge, skills and experiences and to be purpose led, connected, curious, adaptable and human.



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