
Stanton Marris

issue 01:

leadership in local government

leading beyond boundaries





“...local government needs to strengthen its own confidence and capability, engage more effectively with local people, make best use of existing powers, and stop asking for central direction.

“...neither funding, nor powers, nor structures, are by themselves the key to the revitalisation of local government, and the improved self-confidence of local communities. I stress instead the importance of changed behaviours in all tiers of government, of local flexibility, and the pressing need to inspire a sense of powerfulness in local government.”

Sir Michael Lyons, Lyons Inquiry into Local Government, March 2007

“Local government faces the greatest opportunity to achieve real change for two generations. The prospects for ‘localisation’ have never been better. Our challenge is to seize this opportunity to make a lasting difference.”
Paul Coen, Chief Executive, Local Government Association



Building the place-shaping role of local government

In the report of his inquiry into local government, Sir Michael Lyons argues for a wider, strategic ‘place-shaping’ role for local government. However, he says, the “advantages of local government as a way of pursuing the well-being of communities depend on it being able to understand and respond to the needs and concerns of its citizens”.

This means people operating in new ways, willing and able to take the initiative and break imaginatively through structural and behavioural barriers. To reach out into communities and engage them will require, not just less central direction, but mature organisations with confident leadership at all levels. Effective leadership needs to start in the organisation before it can be visible to the community.

What is less clear is how to go about building this leadership capability. Where to invest and focus precious resource? If leadership is the handle on the future, how to use it to open the door?

Local Authorities are engaged in improving performance and delivery through a wide range of activities – many of them difficult, demanding and resource-intensive, some of them essential. But they can only succeed if they are underpinned by the even more difficult and essential human drivers of mindsets and behaviours. This is what makes the difference between activity in the organisation and outcomes for communities.

Lift-off comes when day to day actions and decisions by people at all levels of the organisation are directed towards agreed outcomes, and when leaders do something active to create the culture that shapes those actions and decisions.

In our experience of many years working alongside our clients in local government, we have seen what works and what doesn't; what takes root to help shift the organisation to new levels of success, and what never really gains traction, derailed by an unspoken consensus that it isn't really helping. In this booklet, we share some of what we've learned.



Leadership of Place

Leaders at all levels shape the culture of an organisation. They do this by what they pay attention to, the behaviour they role model (especially how they react to critical incidents), and the behaviour in others that they value and reward.

What people see leaders doing is the strongest factor in determining how people in organisations behave. Yet leadership behaviours are often ‘the elephant on the table’, a big issue for the organisation that feels too difficult to address in a sustained and effective way.

The place-shaping ambition for local government and the ‘leadership of place’ agenda means adding a further dimension to the already complex challenges of leading in a Local Authority. Leadership in the political context, ongoing service improvement and frontline interaction with service users and delivery partners – all this needs to be balanced against the fast-moving policy agenda and dialogue with the centre.

Leadership development, then, must be tailored to the needs of both the sector and the unique local features of each authority.

Below we set out how we see the ‘Leadership of Place’ agenda. Over the next pages, we set out to explain what this means in practice.



Leadership beyond the hard-wiring: achieving sustainable change

How to lead change in a way that will make it stick and deliver benefits for everyone – employees, service users and stakeholders?

We were commissioned to partner Hertfordshire County Council in their pioneering merger of Education with Children's Social Care into a single Children, Schools and Families function, with the aim of a more joined-up service to children.

A core challenge was developing the leadership capability and engaging the commitment and energies of 200 senior managers in both Education and Social Care, many of whom saw the merger as a threat to their established professional practice, boundaries and ways of working.

Every staff member attended a Large Group Event, led by Hertfordshire managers and using actors to bring alive real-life challenges, to communicate the vision and purpose of the change and engage the whole organisation with it.

We provided leadership support by coaching the Chief Executive and the designated Director of Children's Services, as well as the Head of Organisation Development responsible for implementing the project.

All 200 managers experienced 'leader, manager, coach', a series of workshops which worked with real business issues to focus on their role as managers of change. Managers began talking about the three 'hats' they wore, as leaders, managers and coaches.

The change was embedded and provided the model for 2004 legislation requiring local authorities to integrate children's services, and the creation of other Children's Services Directorates.

The benefits for Hertfordshire were a new organisation in which the practical and emotional implications for staff had begun to be worked through from the start of a major change.

“Changing processes and modern IT won’t deliver on their own. We must liberate and support managers and staff to take the lead and ownership of new solutions.”
Stephen Hughes, Chief Executive, Birmingham City Council



Leadership beyond the hard wiring: achieving sustainable change

Change happens when people behave differently; people behave differently when they experience new ways of working that make their jobs easier and more satisfying, new behaviours that help them get results and enjoy their work, and new possibilities that excite them and inspire them to work towards personal and organisational goals.

Only by engaging every employee in a large organisation and creating distributed leadership do you have a chance of bringing about a major change of direction.

We have a track record of supporting Local Authorities to break through barriers and overcome obstacles by identifying, articulating and embedding the values, mindsets and behaviours that will enable and underpin their future success.

With 55,000 staff Birmingham City Council is the largest local authority in Europe. In 2002 and 2003, its CPA rating was 'weak' and its culture acknowledged to be sluggish, bureaucratic and poor at responding to customer and stakeholder needs.

The Chief Executive commissioned us to support a programme of organisation development to achieve a step change in performance and delivery capacity. With visible support from the top, staff have developed a way of working summarised as belief, excellence, success and trust: Birmingham BEST.

Every team, outside of schools, in BCC will experience a workshop built around BEST. Facilitated by a colleague they have chosen from within their team, teams are assessing how they can make BEST real in their work every day and commit to practical team actions. Actions are being followed up and lessons drawn of the whole organisation.

We helped BCC with the programme, the materials and the training of all managers and nearly 2,000 BEST Leaders – the team facilitators, some of whom had never run a meeting before.

The BEST behaviours are seen as key to underpinning a whole series of major transformation programmes Birmingham is undertaking. They are clear that engaging everyone across the Council around the mindset and behaviours required for the future will help to accelerate the journey of improvement.

“Advice from Stanton Marris has been consistently valuable. I have drawn on their support in re-designing the organisation around our strategic objectives, developing the leadership capacity we need for the future and shifting the culture. They have a firm grasp of the issues and are easy for people at all levels to work with. This enables them to offer real challenge when appropriate.”

Barry Quirk, Chief Executive, London Borough of Lewisham



Leadership beyond individual leaders: building the leadership capability of the organisation as a whole

How to change gear from an organisation with some good leaders to an organisation that is well led?

Training and development courses for leaders, often held off-site, usually leave people feeling more confident, more competent and with new strategies to try out. But it is often hard to see how the investment has translated into outcomes for the organisation and its service users. More and more, our clients want leadership development in the context of teams, working together with the real work of the organisation and the real issues and challenges before it.

In Somerset County Council the cabinet members and senior officers have been working together on their leadership of the organisation. This has led them to better understand each other and their respective contributions to a significant change agenda.

They have been driven by the desire to capture what is distinctive about Somerset and how that will develop in the future ‘shaping of place’. They developed together a set of values and behaviours necessary to bring about the shift they envisaged for the organisation and measured themselves against those in 360 degree feedback. Managers and staff more widely are building the values into their view of the future.

The joint top team has invested time in developing a compelling ‘story’ that captures the journey of change for the Somerset community and the council’s place in it – a story that is simpler and deeper than the statements of vision, mission and strategic objectives.

Leadership beyond a single institution: reaching outside the organisation to develop and lead effective partnerships

How to lead without authority?

Partnership working, driven by mechanisms like LSPs and LAAs, visions like 'place-shaping' and 'enhanced two-tier working' and the search for greater effectiveness through sharing and outsourcing of services, is increasingly the organisational priority for local government.

London Borough of Lewisham wanted to engage key partners before the official start of its integrated Children and Young People Directorate. A conference of key decision makers and representatives from all the partners in children's services agreed the outcomes they wanted from the new function and discussed how they wanted to work together going forwards. This set the context for the subsequent reorganisation and the eventual successful establishment of a Children and Young People Strategic Partnership Board.

Dotting the 'i's and crossing the 't's on governance and accountability structures can be a way of avoiding the tough work. So can the assumption that it all depends on personalities and relationships. Supportive and enabling structures and strong relationship management skills are both important. More than most organisations local authorities need to develop the skills to bring people together to face and work the difficult issues that are shared.

To be most effective, the work of leadership in this area is to bring people together and face the difficult issues of loyalties, tensions, potential losses. It takes great confidence to be able to 'give up' for an uncertain common aim and to learn, as one of our clients puts it to 'lead from behind'.



Taking local leadership to the next level

Are leaders in your authority developing the organisation to achieve lasting impact by:

- Personally leading on what's most critical for the organisation to achieve its goals?
- Communicating a compelling story, face to face?
- Making sure that all managers are fully involved and playing their role as leaders?
- Thinking through the leadership of place agenda and what it means for everyone concerned?
- Planning and making appropriate changes to structures, systems and processes to reinforce the focus on what matters most?
- Modelling behaviours that characterise the desired organisational culture?
- Maintaining consistent attention and focus on priorities over time?
- Embedding the changes in everyday work at team level through dialogue and open discussion?

If these questions resonate with what you're already thinking, or if they are hard to answer, get in touch with John Bruce-Jones who leads on our work in local government and we will talk it through with you.

What we do

We help our clients make their strategy work, by:

- Supporting leaders
- Developing organisations
- Engaging people

Who we work with

Some of our Local Authority clients

- Birmingham City Council
- Buckinghamshire County Council
- Hertfordshire County Council
- Kent County Council
- Leadership Centre for Local Government
- Local Government Association
- London Borough of Barking & Dagenham
- London Borough of Camden
- London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham
- London Borough of Lambeth
- London Borough of Lewisham
- London Borough of Waltham Forest
- Oxfordshire County Council
- Somerset County Council



Other public sector clients

- Department for Constitutional Affairs (now the Ministry of Justice)
- Department for Education and Skills
- Home Office
- Environment Agency
- Healthcare Commission
- Independent Police Complaints Commission
- Prime Minister's Delivery Unit
- HM Treasury
- Foreign Office

Some of our private sector clients:

- AstraZeneca
- Pearson Group
- Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer
- Balfour Beatty Rail Infrastructure Services

Energising the organisation

A series of think pieces from Stanton Marris:

Issue 01: the sources of energy

Issue 02: managing energy

Issue 03: leading with energy

Issue 04: managing the energy in M&As

Issue 05: decluttering

Issue 06: de-fogging

Issue 07: holding on and letting go

Issue 08: building an intuitive organisation

Issue 09: making strategy live

Issue 10: meaningful engagement

If you would like copies of any of these previous issues or if you would like to be added to our mailing list for future issues please email us at cathieclearwater@stantonmarris.com.

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We help you to make your strategy work. We work closely with leaders at all levels to design, articulate and deliver the changes that will create impact, to connect the business with its stakeholders and customers, and to engage the whole organisation in moving forward.

To find out more, please visit our website www.stantonmarris.com or call Cathie Clearwater at +44 (0) 20 7637 0290.

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