



LIVING LEADERSHIP



**great leaders great places**



# A manifesto for leadership

## Foreword

As the Leadership Centre enters its second year of operation we want to share with the wider local government audience our thinking and approach to the leadership challenges facing authorities today: the challenge is as much about governance as government.

Over the last year we have been working with the top teams of a large number of authorities across England. Our work has been both discreet and discrete. There are no banners saying the Leadership Centre has arrived. Nor is our work standardised. Rather each engagement with an authority is different, tailored to meet the aspirations and challenges of that authority.

In addition to our direct engagement with individual authorities (and also with groups of authorities), we have also been creating the space for leading players in local government to critically reflect on their experiences.

One such exercise was a series of discussions and learning sets with a number of authorities that we undertook in the second half of 2005. A more detailed description of the process is outlined in the section headed *Light years ahead*. These discussions have confirmed our views about the particular challenges facing local government leaders. This publication highlights some of those key themes and comprises our *Manifesto for leadership*.

Our interest in leadership is not in leadership per se, but in creating change that results in better lives for citizens.

I would like to thank all the participants. They have all informed our thinking: the manifesto is our own. It is a working document that will evolve through our engagement with authorities and civic leaders over the years to come.

**Stephen Taylor**  
Chief executive  
Leadership Centre



# An eight-point manifesto: Leadership in local government

01

**It's about leadership,  
not just leaders**

The talents of individuals are only part of the story. Leaders work within teams which interact with other parts of the organisation and externally. Their effectiveness is shaped by those dynamics and by the processes, structures and relationships of the whole. Developing individuals is not enough.

**We will address the setting within which leaders work as well as developing leaders themselves**

02

**Leadership is of the place,  
not just the organisation**

The task of local government is more than to deliver good services, vital though that is. It is to provide leadership of locality, engaging many other organisations and people with the aim of making it a better place for everyone to live.

**We will help councils in leadership of their place**

03

**Respect difference**

There are useful leadership principles but there are no useful off-the-shelf leadership packages. Leadership work must be in the context of a council's legacy, challenges and way of being.

**We will always start from the realities of the organisation and its place. We will engage with people on terms agreed by them, with interventions appropriate to them**

04

**Leading means  
telling a story**

Strategies, budgets and action plans may speak to the head, but not to the heart. People want to be part of something they think is worthwhile and want to feel their contribution is important. Stories help shape how people see the world. But leaders must also be listeners

**We will help leaders not just communicate but connect**



## 05

### Leading requires 'reading'

Leadership changes things. Leading requires 'reading' the situation and responses have to be tailored. Leadership requires a range of responses. Equally that very context is in part created by leadership.

**Our approach will have rigour but it will be practical, helping people develop skills as part of a continuous evolution**

## 06

### Members and officers travel together

Executives and corporate management teams – like wheels on a bike – need each other to go forward. The relationship is evolving. What differentiates them is important but what unites them is more so.

**Our focus will always be the senior political and managerial group**

## 07

### Politics matter

There has been big investment in developing managers as leaders, and it has paid off. Developing politicians, different but equally important, has been comparatively neglected on the unspoken assumption that it is unwanted, unnecessary or too hard.

**We will redress the balance**

## 08

### People learn more from experience than from being told

People learn to lead in different ways, but it's hard to beat experience in real-life situations as well as having the opportunity to reflect with others on that experience and on yourself.

**We will create opportunities and spaces for leaders to learn over time in their organisation and with others**





The authorities taking part were: Lewisham, Birmingham, Swindon, South Tyneside, Shropshire and Stoke-on-Trent. Islington took part in the interview stage.

## Light years ahead

*Living leadership* is the result of a series of 'learning sets' which sprang from the Leadership Centre's desire to ensure our role in leadership development accurately reflects the needs of leaders and chief executives.

Leadership in local government is unique for three reasons:

- Beyond Westminster, the local authority is the only organisation with a democratic mandate to serve its locality
- Unlike Whitehall, local government officers serve all elected members, not only those in power
- Unlike the private sector, local government serves everyone in the locality, not just the customers it seeks

We wanted to explore leadership development – without any predisposed assumptions – within this context by learning from real-life experience to see if any common practices emerged.

Our intention is to add value to the leadership development needs of local government – and the debate around leadership – by recognising the changing role of local government and being useful beyond what is currently known.

To this end we have started to bring together a selection of chief executives and their respective leaders or mayors from local authorities (classified either as an excellent council or where rapid change programmes are in place)

to give them a forum to reflect on their experiences. In these pioneering learning sets participants can exchange invaluable experiences about the challenges they face and how the skills and capabilities they have developed can be learnt by others.

We asked OPM to work with us to conduct a series of incisive one-to-one interviews with seven key local authorities which generated a set of issues and themes that revealed a framework for discussion. This culminated in two day-long events, facilitated by Sue Goss and Paul Tarplett.

The authorities taking part are: the London Borough of Lewisham, Birmingham City Council, Swindon Borough Council, South Tyneside Council, Shropshire County Council and Stoke-on-Trent City Council. The London Borough of Islington took part in the interview stage.

Thanks to the protection Chatham House Rules affords, the learning sets elicited lively, honest and revealing discussions.

We hope that by sharing these ideas, we can provide food for thought for other leaders, as well as offer some thinking to underpin the future work of the Leadership Centre.

Excellent service delivery may be only one aspect of local government, but it is vital in earning the legitimacy for wider governance roles.



## The changing scene

The role of local government has changed dramatically over recent years. It has transformed from simply running an organisation, to leading “a place”. Managers and politicians are now focused, not simply on delivering direct services, but on a far wider range of actions to improve the lives of the communities they serve. Curiously this is a return to the role local government played in its heyday in the 19th century.

Councils are the leaders of communities – the driving force behind partnerships, orchestrators of resources and catalysts for change.

The skill-set for chief executives as well as politicians has transformed as a result.

The events that local government leaders might now face include anything from a terrorist attack to a tornado to massive job losses in the private sector that reverberate across the community to high profile murders to perhaps even rioting residents – and each requires very different responses.

Pre-requisite skills for today's leaders are an ability to communicate, bring together different interests and create space for solution-finding. Leaders interact far more with other public sector leaders and ‘governors’ in policing and in health, for example. They spend more time talking to the public, working within the community, and with regional and national government. The job has grown in scale and demands and expectations have risen.

Modern leaders are eloquent about the importance of understanding the context for leadership. The role changes dramatically from place to place, they argue. A city is different to a London borough and to a historic shire county. Each ‘place’ has its own sense of culture and identity. Each community has its own problems and opportunities. The need to influence key national players brings with it a concern for reputation and brand and the need to ‘tell the story’ of a particular city, town or rural area.

Local government is now not simply the representative body of local communities, but the hub of a network of public, voluntary and private sector agencies in a locality.

Not only do different authorities have different powers, but partnership arrangements differ from place to place. In addition, each modern local authority, when choosing between directly elected mayors, mayor and city manager or leader and cabinet models, design their own governance system, and therefore each has subtle differences of accountability, public access and public engagement. The directly elected mayor model is relatively new, and local authorities have not yet fully adjusted. There are implications for the way officers work. With fewer checks and balances, for example, it becomes more important to offer a multiplicity of viewpoints from different professionals, rather than a preformed officer perspective. Chief executives and politicians have to be expert on the strengths and weaknesses of the governance arrangements in their locality in order to design the right way of working. As they move from one local authority to another, managers need to change their leadership approach.

Each organisation has its own distinct culture, each set of politicians has their own rich history of battles fought and won. An ability to understand the organisation, while constantly improving delivery, is as important as understanding the outside world.

Excellent service delivery may be only one aspect of local government, but it is vital in earning the legitimacy for wider governance roles.

Leaders are therefore constantly working around the three dimensions of political, managerial and community leadership.



“The interventions I make will vary on the context. It’s important people know I am thinking about the situation and deciding what sort of leader to be.”

## One leader one theory

It is clear that local government leaders have a wide diversity of approaches and styles. Some find particular theorists useful such as James Kouzes, Barry Posner, Martin Seligman, Peter Drucker, Howard Gardner, Tom Peters and Mark Moore. Some find particular approaches useful such as the John Adair model of task, team and self, the theory of transformational leadership, or Myers Briggs Type Indicators.

Some were more sceptical about theory or quoted more personal role-models such as ‘my dad’, or watching others: “I’m always fascinated by Alex Ferguson and

Jose Mourinho.” Some reflect on experiences outside the world of local government and have analysed and adapted their learning from elsewhere. What was consistent however, was an ability to reflect on and to describe those styles.

Each leader has, in effect a ‘theory’ of his or her own on leadership.

These approaches are deeply personal and powerfully internalised; often bound up with important personal values and beliefs.

## Situational leadership

Both in politics and management, leaders are often very different from each other, with very distinctive styles. It is clear that what works well in one context might not transfer to another place or another time – the strong ‘story telling’ style of one politician, for example contrasted with the quiet, listening and consensus-building style of another.

Chief executives describe a contrast of styles between those needed in the early stages of change such as setting the pace, attention to detail, driving the process – and a more empowering style that takes over once the leadership of others is strengthened.

Learning set participants agree the leadership style adopted depends on circumstances and are very conscious that their own style and approach has to vary according to the demands of differing situations.

Leaders are often using one style at 10 am in discussion with the Chamber of Commerce and another at 7 pm in a meeting with the public. They need a repertoire of approaches, and the flexibility and confidence to self-consciously respond to each situation in the right way.

“The interventions I make will vary on the context. It’s important people know I am thinking about the situation and deciding what sort of leader to be.”





## Reading the situation

If leadership is situational, a key aspect of leadership must be the ability to read situations accurately. Leaders and chief executives spend a long time thinking and assessing the situation:

“Looking for abnormalities – things that have changed.”

They pay a lot of attention to understanding the place and its needs, getting to grips with where power lies, diagnosing problems, identifying leadership elsewhere and putting together alliances. Often leadership is about understanding the changing context and making judgments about the right role to play – for example making choices about the role of a city in a city region, or the role of a county council in a two-tier setting.

Leaders are often simultaneously reading political and governance structures, organisational problems and cultures, and the individual behaviour and perspectives of

the people they meet. Political leaders are often trying to assess risk and understand legitimacy; managers trying to work out what sort of organisational responses might work in a particular situation. One politician stressed the need to make careful judgments, taking time over decisions. One chief executive said:

“For me, leadership is basically questioning, helping others to solve problems by asking good questions.

“Leadership requires you to understand complex situations and multiple causation, then to describe complicated things in simple language without offering a false simplicity.”

For several leaders, a crucial part of the role was telling stories, so that others could see how situations were changing.

## ‘Be’ing a leader

Leadership is about having both the self-awareness and the awareness of the capabilities of others to be able to respond effectively in different situations.

Leaders have to plan carefully how to ‘be’ in each situation – for example the first meeting between a leader and their chief executive is a very important opportunity to symbolise a change of style or values.

Sometimes leaders deliberately play against type, demonstrating repertoire and ability to choose styles for particular situations.

Sometimes it is symbolically necessary to lead from the front, not backing down, making a powerful gesture to demonstrate that things will change. These moments test trust and authority to the limit and need to be planned carefully. Leaders have to think about history, timing and about their leadership span in order to plan when – during a term of office or an unfolding situation – to ‘play’ different sorts of these symbolic roles.

Not all leaders will do the same thing in the same situation. Personal authenticity is crucial. A leader has to be true to him/herself and at the same time take account of the situation.

“It’s very important not to create an ideal model of leadership and then try to teach it to people... You have to start with the strengths and weaknesses of the person who is leading...”

Some favoured a highly collective style of leadership and encouraged others to adopt a more visible leadership role.

“I often phone a district chief executive and ask if he or she is willing to lead something on behalf of the whole county.”



## A head for leading

A leader has, in effect, to have a diagnosis of each situation and a model in his/her own head of what is likely to work in that situation.

Interestingly those leaders who have evolved a particular style – but faced with changed circumstances, such as a new political leader, find it ineffective – have to change themselves, something which can prove to be very difficult.

“You learn when you’re on a burning platform... I found the old way of functioning was creating ever-growing problems for me and I had no solutions... I worked hard with a coach to explore other ways of thinking.”

An accurate mental model is, therefore, important, and experience may lead to changing or adapting this. It suggests a need to understand and theorise situations, in order to explore what might be needed.

Crucially, leaders and chief executives use others to help test their mental models, to offer feedback and challenge, and are constantly reframing problems and solutions.

## See-through values

Values have to be made explicit, leaders have to be clear about what they believe and comfortable with the decisions they take. Leadership styles are underpinned by values such as integrity, excellence, respecting people, enthusiasm, a culture of openness, offering praise and celebrating success, listening and consistency.

One authority pays particular attention to the behaviours that underpin mutual respect in the community. This reaches further than not tolerating bullying members, for example, but instead extends to the local area brand. Officers or members who criticise important partners in public are given a quiet talking to!

It is important to develop the legitimacy within which those values sit, so they can be used as a basis for challenge.

Even when planning radical change – including taking swift action to respond to failure, sacking people and making redundancies – several leaders stress the need to act in ways that fit with organisational values, in order to sustain their integrity and coherence.

Values are important for influencing and leading partnerships. A value base that is shared by partners and by the wider community is a powerful tool to both reinforce the legitimacy of partnership decisions and to hold partners to account.

An important local government value is the commitment to democratic legitimacy. This isn’t elicited by local

government leaders trying to control and direct others, but by securing the legitimacy and accountability of partnerships, by engaging with other community leaders and by resolving power dynamics between key players.

For several leaders and chief executives, success depends on creating a culture within which others take responsibility. This means diffusing and sharing the capacity to read situations and to make good judgments. One chief executive stressed distributed leadership, drawing on the leadership of the whole top two or three tiers or managers.

“People are not expected to be clones but to find their own contribution, think about how they are helping each other.”

Another chief executive describes the style as:

“Dead informal, relaxed, managing the spirit of the organisation, treating people how you’d want to be treated. Not being afraid to try things out, spending a lot of time working on relationships.”

Or as one leader puts it:

“Most of it is getting people to want to do things. Everyone’s a leader.”

## “Organisational development is too important to be left to HR.”

Chief executive



### A head for design

Leaders have the power to design prototype ways of doing things that affect governance, to empower others to make decisions and to plan the dispersal of power – helping people to do things for themselves. Chief executives also seem to spend a lot of time designing systems within which things can effectively happen. Chief executives spend a considerable amount of time designing culture change interventions, reward systems, ways of working, and development programmes.

“Organisational development is too important to be left to HR.”

This skill of design applies both to the right governance arrangements in a locality, and the right shape for the organisation. Design includes thinking about how decisions are made, how accountability works and how the public is consulted. A crucial partnership role for leaders and chief executives is the design of effective working arrangements for partnerships.

### Four funerals and a wedding

A leader now has to understand the people and place and its diversity well enough to identify the thread that holds disparate communities together. The leader takes this thread and spins it into a storyline that unites everyone. As the author of the storyline, the leader acts as the demonstrative voice of the people and consequently a driving force for cohesion.

Leaders think about the ‘story’ of their place and issues in imaginative ways. Communication is at the front of leaders’ minds, not simply in terms of speech-making but

the symbolic values of their actions. The more visible they become, the more important it is to understand what they are doing and how it will be interpreted. Leaders often have a ceremonial role for the whole place and politicians communicate as much through powerful symbolic actions as they do through words. Someone quoted former New York mayor Rudi Giuliani saying ‘funerals are important’. Both mayors and leaders have stories to tell about the importance of symbolic funerals in their areas.

### Creating legitimacy

Organising and understanding legitimacy is seen as another key skill – being aware of where legitimacy comes from and gathering enough legitimacy to push through change. One participant suggested they had three accountabilities: to the electorate, the press and the Audit Commission!

Sometimes this means taking risks and taking a stand. Sometimes it means building powerful alliances,

sometimes it means effective lobbying and influencing of others. Developing a strong set of values is a part of the legitimacy-building process – since it offers an agreed base from which to challenge and change the behaviour of others. The capacity to build the legitimacy necessary to achieve local goals is a measure of the difference between passive acceptance of the agenda of others and the ability to shape and determine events.



## Political leadership

While there are similarities, the role of a political leader is seen as tougher – with less personal development and fewer institutional props to support their authority. Building support and legitimacy is a key part of the politician's role. They have to manage expectations inside their political party and their group if they are to win political support for a change agenda. Again, symbolic actions are important, such as inviting backbenchers for informal discussions, engaging them in exploring policy issues and so on.

“Political leadership is different because it relies to a much greater extent on consent... In a democracy it relies on persuading people to let you lead them.”

Political leaders often have to be highly sensitive to the way they manage the behaviours and roles of political colleagues.

“If my group is insubordinate I can't sack them.”

But even with narrow majorities, good leaders can challenge colleagues and ensure they behave in ways that support the leadership project.

## The elected mayor

The role of a directly elected mayor might appear more straightforward, but it has its own challenges. Mayors can step back from the delivery of council services and view the borough or city as a whole. They create a sense of identity, offering a powerful figurehead in the community. One area has tested the public visibility of the mayor and found that 37% of local people could name him – a comparable profile to national politicians.

The elected mayors we talked to spent far less time managing the politics of their own group – perhaps 10% – in comparison to 50% of their leader counterparts. They have a status among foreign visitors and the business community. On the other hand, mayors are expected to tackle a greater number of issues without

the usual boundaries, and so endure an increased sense of mismatch between expectations and the reality of what they can achieve.

The pressure from outside can be immense.

“Everyone wants a piece of you.”

Mayors also have to be very careful about how they intervene in situations. Since their impact is powerful and highly visible, too much direct intervention can undermine the role of other managers and leaders.

“Done too often, everything grinds to a halt.”



“About half my time is spent on external relationships.”

## The public servant

Chief executives have a duty to serve the public interest, as well as to serve a particular leader. They therefore need the legitimacy to challenge leaders. This comes from their specialist skills, their role as public servant and from their stewardship of the running of council that underpins policy decisions. They are guardians of particular values in the public interest which may mean they have to challenge particular politicians. It is important for politicians to recognise and respect these wider roles.

The emotional demands of the chief executive role are therefore high, it requires strength to stand up to pressures from others and the role carries risks – political leaders can sack a chief executive that doesn't suit them. Chief executives need a strong internalised sense of the legitimacy of their role, and of the authority they carry to do what is right.

## A narrowing field

There don't appear to be huge differences between the role of a leader and that of an elected mayor. Instead there is a continuum with mayors at one end. Some political leaders are more mayoral in their style. The leader of a large city, for instance, is often expected to represent that city both abroad and at national level in the UK.

Differences between political and managerial roles also appear to be narrowing – and not because of meddling politicians as you might have thought in the past! But more as a result of chief officers taking on a leadership role across partnerships, inevitably involving skills such as building alliances, winning consent, listening and brokering – the sort that might previously have been labelled political.

Both officers and councillors are involved with communities and partners. Chief executives and leaders often jointly lead on relationships with partners, such as local strategic partnerships. There is inevitable cross-over. Chief executives are involved in building profile and representing the local authority while the leader may have an internal role marshalling leverage and focusing on particular issues.

“When we met recently with faith communities it was the mayor, chief executive and the borough commander.”

“About half my time is spent on external relationships.”

## Two don't become one

The closeness of the relationship should be balanced with a recognition of the difference – otherwise two leaders would not be necessary! At times it's crucial to appreciate the difference between the roles played by an appointed public servant and an elected politician.



While personal chemistry can be very important, with constant attention, most relationships can be made to work.

## Building the relationship

In a successful authority, the chief executive and leader work well together. The relationship is often a close one, and leaders describe the importance of fitting their styles together, aligning messages and providing coherent leadership to staff and the community. They spend a lot of time understanding each other, reflecting on their differences and how to best use the skills of both, self-consciously adjusting and changing mental models for the right response to a problem. Each acknowledges the importance of the personal relationship and how much easier joint leadership becomes where there is trust and openness.

Several chief executives testify to the importance of symbolic acts. The first meeting is often crucial. As the relationship develops, the ability to challenge each other becomes important. Maintaining the relationship is particularly important when administrations change. It is of course easier if the leader appoints the chief executive but politicians often inherit a chief executive appointed by a previous administration. Inevitably, there are dangers of distrust, and politicians can be wary that officers have until recently been implementing the agenda of another political party. Hard work is needed to build a new understanding. While personal chemistry can be very important, with constant attention, most relationships can be made to work.

Conversations allowing each person to learn about the other are very important, and it helps if both leaders together decide on working styles, degree of openness for example, negotiating clearly over roles.

Reflecting on the relationship is usually informal rather than formal – although in one case the executive coach of the chief executive also interviewed the mayor and helped to facilitate shared reflection on the relationship.

Leaders and chief executives need frequent face-to-face meetings to agree, not simply direction, but the speed and style of the leadership approach. Leaders and chief executives often decide together about change strategy – creating turbulence, for example, to unsettle old ways of doing things, bringing in new blood, confronting poor performance head on, agreeing the speed and the style of change.

Chief executives are clear they need to support the leader and his/her priorities visibly.

“Managers and politicians have to complement each other... it’s the job of the chief executive to be the complementor... the mayor is the ‘prince’; the chief executive has to support, not just in the organisation, but has to have complementary perspectives and practice in the field of community leadership...”

“There’s a requirement on both to understand each other, but the chief executive is paid to have higher order skills... to be able to implement...”

Often it is officers who adapt their approach to align with – and sometimes compensate for – the style adopted by leading politicians. But perhaps leadership is at its most effective when this is reciprocal, explicit and self-conscious. When political and managerial leaders can explain their own styles and values and combine their efforts to optimise their impact on situations. It follows that any change of political or managerial leadership leads to the renegotiation not only of leadership tasks and roles, but also of the values and styles that underpin them.



Both leaders and chief executives are probably never simply leading but orchestrating and supporting a far wider leadership system.



## Conducting the orchestra

The inner leadership system can also include other key people, such as the deputy leader. Sometimes faced with an unstable situation with competing political leaders, it is politically dangerous for the chief executive to become too close to one member. In other systems where there is no overall control, the leadership partnership or coalition includes the leaders of two or more political groupings. In some local authorities the importance of the community brand has meant that the leadership of the opposition is consulted and involved at all levels while in others this is not the case.

Beyond this is perhaps a second interlocking leadership system at the heart of a local authority – linking the relationship between the leader and his/her cabinet and between the cabinet and top team – which then relates to wider, multifaceted leadership networks both formal and informal. The leader has a key role helping the cabinet to work as a team, often reuniting members after potential factionalism and infighting leading up to selection and election.

Crucial to maintaining close working between cabinet and chief officers is the exploration of roles and boundaries, articulating the different leadership roles in political, managerial and community settings. Clarity about role differences makes it easier to ‘pass the ball’ and draw on the skills of both managers and politicians. It is a key

officer skill to understand what members are trying to do and to provide them with solutions.

Authorities have put a lot of effort into building the whole corporate leadership system beyond pairings of portfolio holders and directors. Several interviewees stress the importance of both leadership teams working together to understand each other, sharing strategy and difficult decisions, agreeing roles and boundaries within these with which everyone felt comfortable.

As the community leadership role widens, this raises new questions about these roles and boundaries and about capabilities. Leadership, in this context, comes not just from the local authority, but from partner organisations and from the community. We may need to think less about leadership and more about ‘leadership systems’ – thinking about the relationships between leaders and the ability to orchestrate leadership between several players. This role becomes more complex in a two-tier system. One chief executive of a county council describes their role as being the architect of a leadership system involving at least 45 different chief executives.

Both leaders and chief executives are probably never simply leading but orchestrating and supporting a far wider leadership system.



Rather than courses, what proves most helpful is constructive challenge 'in role'.

## Learning leadership

Once you reach the level of a leader or chief executive, you are mostly responsible for your own learning. Some have coaches or mentors who have proved very valuable. Beyond that, people try to build in stimulus and challenge, to learn from peers, outsiders, the brightest thinkers, and books – history and biographies.

Theories about leadership often fail to connect with the real life experience. Often that experience comes from moving around within local government, seeing how things are done in different places, although experience of business and other community leadership roles contributes greatly. The most effective learning is often gained from opportunities to accelerate that experience, seeing more of what happens elsewhere through visits, raids, the IDeA Peer Review Programme and the CPA review process. The other most important aspect of learning, repeated over and over, is creating time to think and reflect. Leaders need time to carefully digest their own reading of situations, and to revisit their analysis and their mental models. Rather than courses, what proves most helpful is constructive challenge 'in role'.

Leaders often have their own processes for self-assessment, including externally-facilitated panel

interviews for chief executives to help set learning objectives and personal development plans for councillors. Chief executives value the training for CPA inspections, executive coaching, and action learning sets for chief executives across agencies. Councillors value learning from practice. There is strong support for learning through doing, getting out more, understanding and exploring local problems.

"The best way to learn is from mistakes... but it helps to learn from other people's mistakes too... there are only so many mistakes you can let an organisation make!"

Nevertheless there is also a plea, particularly from politicians, to be able to revisit the basics, and to extend personal capabilities and skills, a sense that if leaders need a range of skills, they need support in developing the full repertoire.

"There's room for basic skills training for politicians. I know colleagues who have been slagged off for getting voice training, but all these things are important."



## Developing politicians

There is a belief that: “The highest priority is to develop members.”

But it isn't easy. Initiatives such as the IDeA's Leadership Academy have made considerable progress, but the obstacles that have impeded development in the past still remain. Members tire of classroom training quickly, and are often 'activist' in their learning styles, so that approaches often need to be highly creative. Academic ability varies considerably, and while some councillors like nothing better, others are uncomfortable in highly theoretical or academic discussions. Time is the greatest problem councillors face, and for many a regular commitment to any training is seen as unrealistic for pragmatic reasons, rather than any objections in principle.

The participants felt that political leaders often lose out, for reasons just discussed, or because once they arrive in leadership roles, learning is too exposing, and makes them too vulnerable.

“Politicians need training earlier... before they become leaders...rather than waiting until they've blundered into a position. It's not too late then, but it's harder, less opportunity to be reflective... less opportunity to try things out.”

Politicians may be reluctant to pass on political skills. Succession-planning can make them nervous, since if they nurture a successor the heir may begin to get restless!

Far-sighted politicians might begin to build opportunities for less experienced politicians to practise their reading and analytical skills, making space for judgment and risk, and seeing who takes up the space. Powerful incidents, such as dealing with strikes and riots, offer good learning, and a brave leader might involve colleagues in debriefing difficult situations and thinking about how they might have been handled differently. Sitting on the board of other public agencies, such as a hospital trust, can be particularly useful for partnership working. Personal development plans are seen as useful, and leaders have an important role to play in encouraging colleagues to develop their individual skills either through training or in practice. Feedback is invaluable, and a good development process builds in opportunities for councillors to gain feedback about their style and effectiveness.



## Developing officers

Most of the authorities represented invest heavily in developing both officers and members and recognise the value of development activity.

We found little support, however, for what was described as a 'sheep dip' approach to training. These are the standard taught modules on skills or theory with little or no connection to the immediate needs and concerns of the organisation. Leadership programmes are most often bespoke, designed within the organisation (either alongside chosen providers or in-house) to ensure they are linked to the organisation's own goals and values. Internal programmes for both middle managers and top managers include taught modules, action learning sets, senior managers' forums and networks, visits, organisational raids and so on.

The design of the development process often matches closely the leadership style and values of the organisation. Authorities that pay a lot of attention to

behaviours include emotional intelligence modules within their leadership development. Those authorities that particularly value ideas and new knowledge include external speakers, learning from the private sector or abroad, in their development programme.

Additional approaches involve being open to external review, such as the IDeA peer review, trial and error, experiment, reviewing, case studies, using real-life complex situations as examples, networking, away-days and senior manager lunches. And feedback processes, such as self assessment and then being challenged on that assessment, are important ways of creating the right culture.

Most authorities have developed a way of assessing capability and competency, and pay considerable attention to linking succession-planning and career structure to development. However, one authority found an expensive competency framework simply generated unhelpful disputes with staff and it has been abandoned.

## Joint top team development

In some authorities considerable time is devoted to members and officers working together to think about the style of leadership extending beyond the top team to a wider group of senior managers. This is especially important when planning change, particularly at the outset when there can be a lot of confusion over roles.

Opportunities for honest feedback and discussion help to generate clarity about mutual expectations and the different roles of members and officers. Most invest in

joint cabinet and corporate management team away days, team building exercises, using facilitators, or using live problems as an opportunity for joint learning.

One authority used a role play technique in which they played each other. One created a quiz, asking challenging questions to politicians and managers. Some use MBTI to understand differences between individuals and some spend considerable time working on values, behaviours and what they need from each other.

## Conclusion

The rich and invaluable accounts these sessions have drawn lead us naturally to want to create more opportunities for leaders to discuss and learn from each other about their approaches to complex situations using live examples.

Leadership of place and the skill of community mediation is the new challenge facing local government leaders. The Leadership Centre – with its essential eight-point manifesto – intends to help leaders to recognise and develop the skills to deal with their fundamentally changing roles.

# An eight-point manifesto: Leadership in local government

**01** It's about leadership, not just leaders

**02** Leadership is of the place, not just the organisation

**03** Respect difference

**04** Leading means telling a story

**05** Leading requires 'reading'

**06** Members and officers travel together

**07** Politics matter

**08** People learn more from experience than from being told



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